

SYNERGY

Volume 4:No.5

Exploring the Boundaries of Cinema and Entertainment



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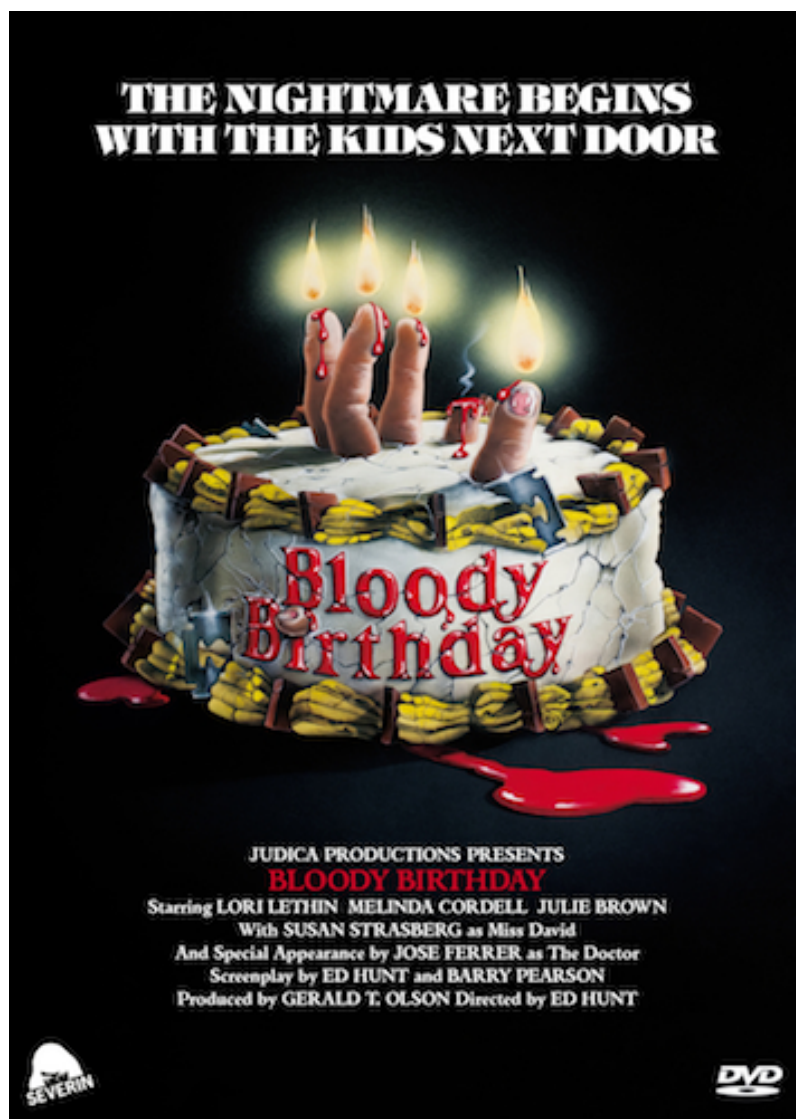
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SYNERGY

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Synergy Magazine reviews DVDs from all regions. The **R** description with each title advises the Region.

1 = USA
2 = UK
3 = Asia
4 = Australia
0 = All region.

DVD-R

DVD-R refers to titles which have not been formally released on DVD but release via specialty DVD firms.

NTSC or PAL is used with the ALL REGION CODE and refers to the TV format.

Blu Ray

We review Blu Rays from all regions; we will clearly list the region (or region free) on each disc.

The best reference site for Blu Ray is <http://www.blu-ray.com>. It includes lots of details about Blu Ray releases and is one of the only reliable sources for information on which Blu

Ray releases are ALL REGION. If you require an ALL region DVD and Blu-ray player, we recommend you look at the Kogan Blu-ray player (<http://www.kogan.com.au>)

For Adult titles, we include an extra reference **(E)** for explicit, **(M)** for mature. Adult content within mainstream titles will be mentioned as appropriate.

DD refers to Digital Download with the format of the download following in brackets.

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The print and digital edition of Synergy is published six times a year and includes reviews from the website from the preceding period expanded content, articles and features research, news, added images, screen shorts and competitions.

Features, articles, news and competitions only appear in the digital and print editions.

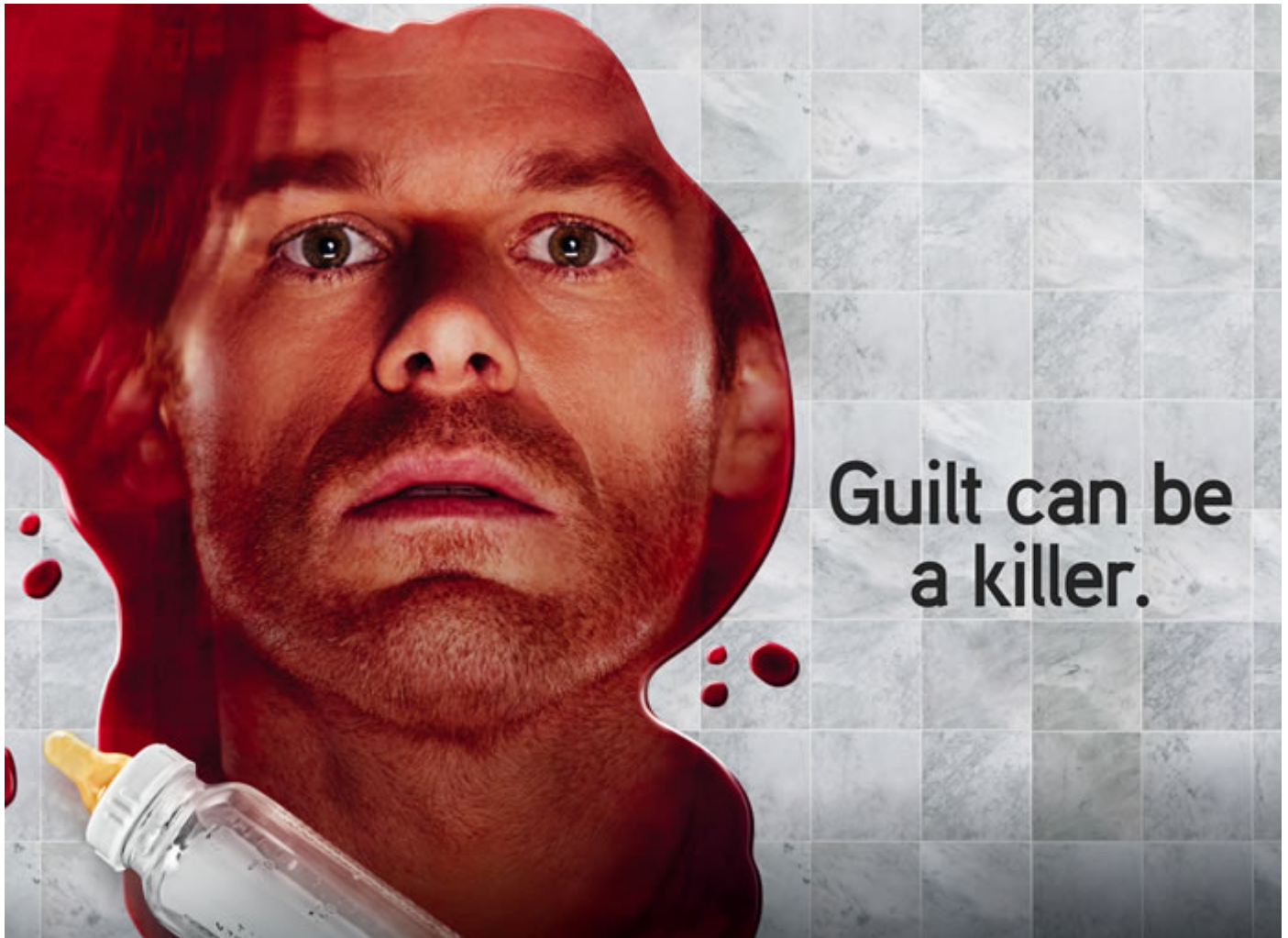
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Welcome to the somewhat belated and smaller issue of Synergy.

It has been a difficult time for us as our managing editor Bob Estreich is in palliative care. From the earliest days of the print issue of Synergy he worked tirelessly to produce astounding articles and the most amazing number of reviews. From world cinema and fiction to adult titles, he wrote about them all. Indeed it became a joke that if paint drying was released on a DVD he would review it !

His encyclopedic knowledge of cinema added to the breadth of every issue of Synergy, while his raucous sense of humor balanced some of the more academic and staid tones of other features.

Bob worked on over five years of Synergy which is an incredible number of features and reviews.

While many reviewers would only focus on specific genres or filmmakers Bob took to the whole field like a fish to water. When more World Cinema began to arrive he loved the challenge of new types of films with fresh perspectives beyond that of the mainstream.

At the same time he helped pioneer our Thinking Time ! Section which began as a series of short documentary reviews and grew to become a major aspect of the magazine. Coupled with the book review section, Synergy expanded to include serious reviews of war, social, political and environmental titles.

Bob's contribution to Synergy cannot be over-estimated he is will be sorely missed.

Robert Black
Editor
Synergy



Sanctuary Season Three 6 Disc Set Magna Home Entertainment

One of the most anticipated sci-fi releases of 2011, Sanctuary is back for its third season and ensures not to disappoint its huge Australian fan-base. Doctor Helen Magnus (Amanda Tapping) and her team continue to track down, study and protect the strange and often terrifying creatures that secretly populate our world.

Season three includes 20 episodes, expanded from earlier seasons to include an amazing array of stories and continued character development.

Sanctuary developed from a series of web episodes in 2007 and has become a major science fiction series with a cult following. This is intelligent science fiction at its very best.

While many DVD series sets do not include a lot of extras, Sanctuary Season 3 includes a great selection including:

- Audio Commentary on Select Episodes
- Bloopers/Outtakes
- Making-of Featurettes:
- Visual Effects of Sanctuary Season 3
- Amanda Tapping Directs "One Night"
- Hollow Earth
- Damian Kindler: In the Director's Chair
- The Music of Sanctuary
- Behind the Scenes: Normandy
- Character Profile: Nikola Tesla

Magna Home Entertainment have given us three copies to giveaway and we are pleased to



offer them in association with this issue.

If you want a chance to win send an email to promotions@synergy-magazine.com with Sanctuary 3 in the subject.

Winners will be chosen at random on September 22rd and notified by email.

Please include your name and postal address in the body of the email.

This competition is open to Australian residents only.



COMEDY FOR XMAS !!

What better Xmas Gift than Stand-Up Comedy. Beyond Home Entertainment has released an amazing selection of comedy titles at excellent prices. This have hit the market in November and are surely to sell fast !

Arj Baker Killogy is a three DVD set and includes his *Live, Balls and Forever* shows. Arj is known for his down to earth observational humour matched with a wicked sense of wit and this is a superb set.



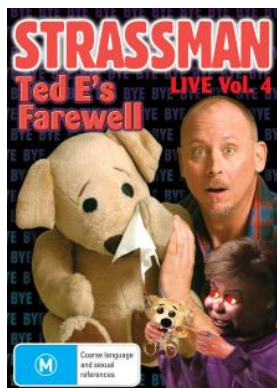
Jimeon has got to be Australia's most loved comedian. He brings together the Irish gift for the gab with an outrageous sense of humour, which has been successful in both film and live shows. This set Features the titles *All Over The Shop*, *Jimeoin On Ice*, *Over The Top* and *Jimeoin & Bob's Cooking Show*. The cooking show alone will have you in stitches, it is like no other cooking show I have ever seen !



David Strassman: Ted E's Farewell DVD

The master ventriloquist in his best show yet!

Strassman's latest show, "Ted E's Farewell", is his most hilarious and twisted ever! The much adored Ted E. Bare has announced his showbiz retirement and, in this side-splitting comedy, we find out why. With hilarious new routines



from a menagerie of puppet freaks and 'wannabe' replacements, this dark and edgy show will leave fans in stitches. Strassman he brings back his characters Chuck Wood, Grandpa Fred, Sid the Beaver, Kevin the Alien, plus many more.

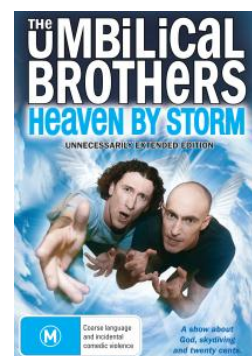
Kitty Flanagan Charming and Alarming. Kitty Flanagan has a marvellously quick paced style which is sharp, bitchy and insightful. She even throws in some stories and a musical number from a special guest. This will be a sure hit.



Fiona O'Loughlin is another of Australia's moved loved comedians. She is a constant guest on TV comedy programs and her comedy is based in the everyday. Her greatest hits is a great collection.



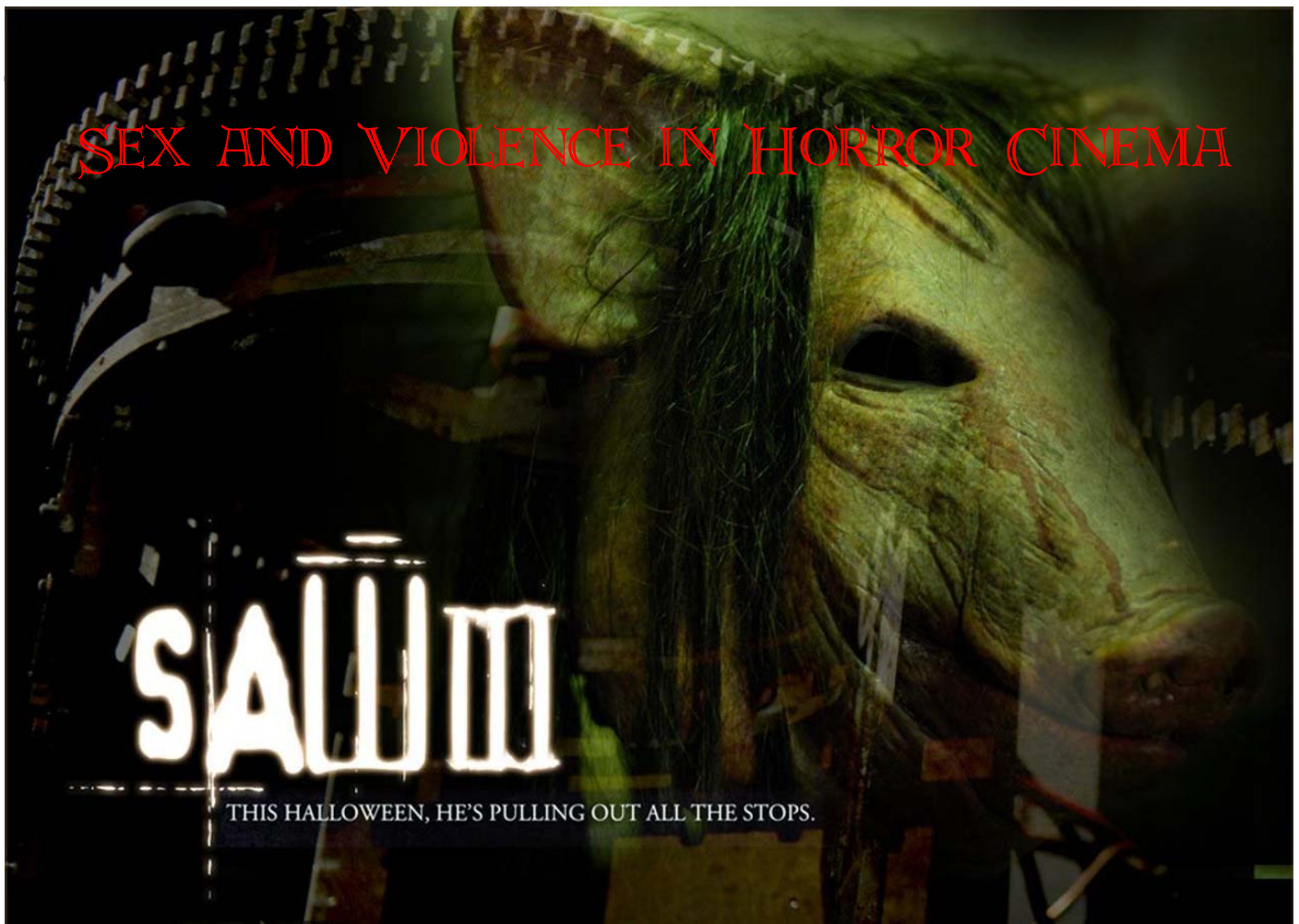
What can you say about the Umbilical Brothers: surreal, bizarre but utterly compelling. *Heaven by Storm* is a true achievement of comedic madness. It won them the coveted Perrier nomination and critics' choice award at the Edinburgh Fringe !



Beyond Home Entertainment has made available two copies of each of these marvellous titles for us If you want a chance to win send an email to promotions@synergy-magazine.com with the title of your choice in the subject.

Winners will be chosen at random on December 10th and notified by email.

Please include your name and postal address.



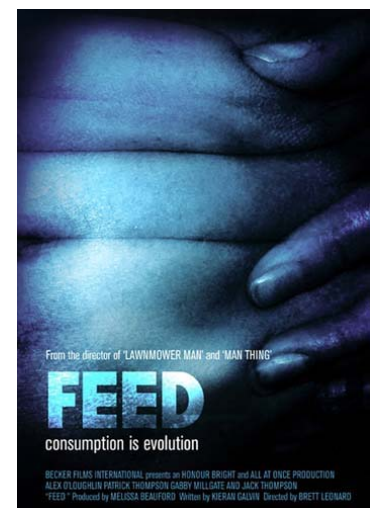
The Call of the Wild: The Nature of Violence

Why do we like horror films? Why does violence, suspense and terror which brings us to the edge of our seats leave us invigorated and begging for more? The answer, I believe, lies deep in our evolutionary history. In the earlier stages of evolution, which we share with our ape and chimp relatives, the primary area of the brain which was active was the old brain, the section of the brain which controls "fight or flight", it also controls dominance and reproduction. The power of this section of the brain can clearly be seen in the behaviour of modern chimps and the great apes, while they can show great affection and care, they are also known for their aggression, dominance and violence.

As humans developed from this early evolutionary form we developed a form of self-awareness and hence reason. This development allowed for the suppression or control of the instincts which drive the animal kingdom. At the same time such instincts have nearly fully disappeared, we have simply relegated them to the unconscious. We like to think we are in control of our desire for sex, dominance, violence and other sensory input, yet so often are at their mercy. Since we disown these drives, they

come to express themselves through nightmares, dreams and the imagination. It is through the imagination that horror has come to exist as the prime expression of that which we try to deny.

Horror literature and cinema is saturated with images of sex, violence and death. They could be considered the three primary themes within horror as a genre. There are some strange and notable additions, while horror does explore extreme sensory indulgence in the form of sexual fetishism and violence, such bodily functions are excretion and eating are not often found in literature or film. An unusual example is the film *Feed* (2005) which focuses on deliberate over feeding of women until they become super obese. It brings together a range of classic extreme horror themes include sex, violence and



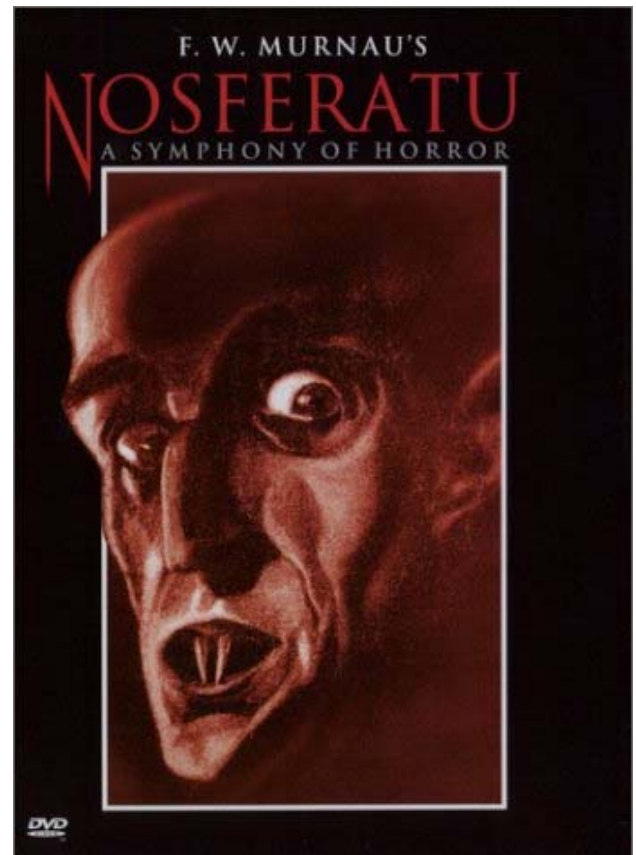
dominance with a focus on eating – certainly an unusual combination.

The Dark Imagination

The key to horror in literature and film is the imagination. It is the way in which it is able to evoke something that is deep within the psyche and create a resonance with suppressed and disowned desires that make it so potent. Classic horror literature focused on using our own imagination to achieve such an end. In many cases it tapped into legends and myths and moulded them to create a tale suitable for the modern audience. Brad Stoker collected all manner of tales about Vlad the Impaler before he wrote *Dracula*, while tales of werewolves abound in classic fictional stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood*. In literature the key was to create a mood and environment in which the reader was able to fill in the details and make an individual visual interpretation in their own imagination. This form of horror is still very popular today since our own imagination is so much more powerful than anything that can be created on celluloid. Horror fiction is also immensely personal since each of us will experience a story differently and see the characters through the lens of our own history. With the advent of cinema horror was immediately the subject of choice, it was lurid, challenging and would bring in the punters, it also offered a truly new medium for exploring the imagination.

Early Horror Films

Some of the earliest films had horror themes such as the shorts of French filmmaker Georges Méliès. However it was with German Expressionist cinema that horror came of age. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *The Golem* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) expressed some of the earliest motifs that became common as horror developed. *Nosferatu* uses violence and eroticism to create what has become



standard for vampires throughout cinema. It is also noted for the superior use of surreal backgrounds, unusual special effects and a superb use of light and shadow. Such films are still intriguing to watch today. The later film *M* (1931) by Fritz Lang combined a crime story with horror elements to explore the world of a child murderer. German Expressionism did not last long but had its influence on Hollywood as directors and set designers migrated to the States. Early Hollywood horror titles such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) combined science fiction and horror and James Whale certainly included dark hints of





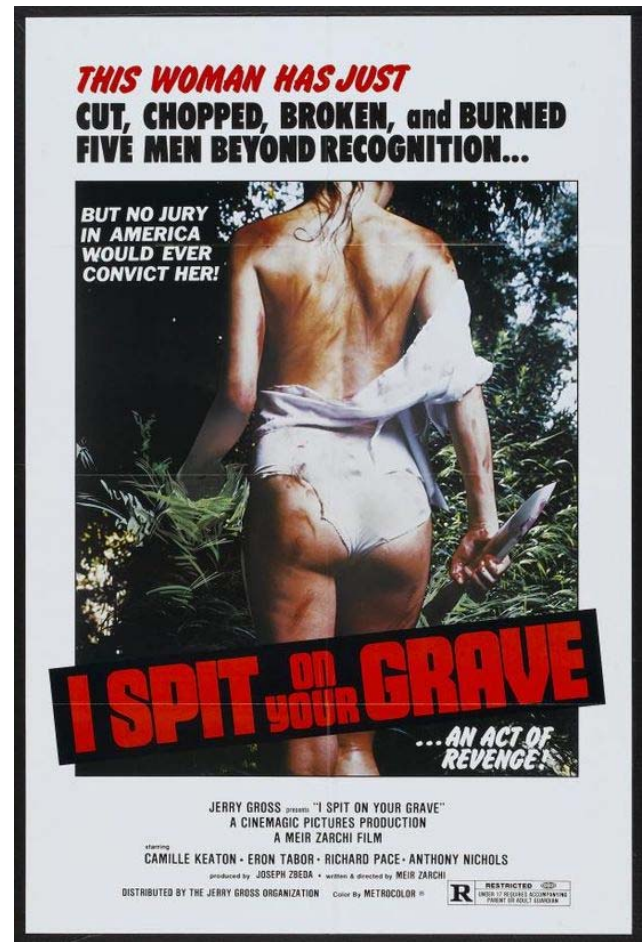
eroticism and violence throughout the films he directed.

The Use of Violence in Horror Cinema

When examining the role of violence in horror cinema I do not believe there is a blanket rule for how much is too much. I do not believe in censorship but do believe that there is various ways in which we can make informed decisions about the significance of violence in terms of cinematic excellence. The most significant way to evaluate violence is to consider the context in which it is expressed. This includes such factors as the plot, character development and the expertise of the filmmaker. These factors cannot be given too much consideration, if a film lacks plot and does not have a well thought out storyline then even the smallest amount of violence (or sex) can be too much. How often have we seen a film in which random acts of sex and violence just seem to be have been included simply for "shock" value. Shock can have its place especially in cult cinema but only if backed by some degree of plot (regardless of how strange it may be).

Less is More

In early horror cinema less was considered more. Inferred violence, violence which took place off screen and hints at "forbidden and dark acts" were enough to carry a story. While we may be in a more explicit culture today in many cases this dictum still very much applies. There is a penchant today, for example, especially within "rape and revenge" films to deliberately push the envelope by extending the rape scenes as long as possible. Early rape revenge titles such as *I Spit on your Grave* (1978), *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Thriller: A Cruel*



Picture (1974) limited the coverage as there was no need to dwell on the rape since the viewer's imagination did the rest and this made them far more effective works of cinema.

A classic example of the modern trend is *Gut-terballs* (2008) which included real sex (which I could take or leave) but a truly revolting rape scene which gratuitous and truly unnecessarily long. I haven't seen a review which did not share this opinion ! Sadly many of these early films are being remade for modern audiences (such as *Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on your Grave* (2010)) with as much violence as the filmmakers can muster. In such cases the plot and character development is overridden by the violence and the artistic merit of the film becomes questionable.

Cult Cinema

An objection to my line of reasoning could be made by viewers who enjoy cult cinema since such cinema revels in excessive sex and violence. Indeed the oldest gore classic was *Blood Feast* (1963) and used violence in an over the top manner. The difference I believe between



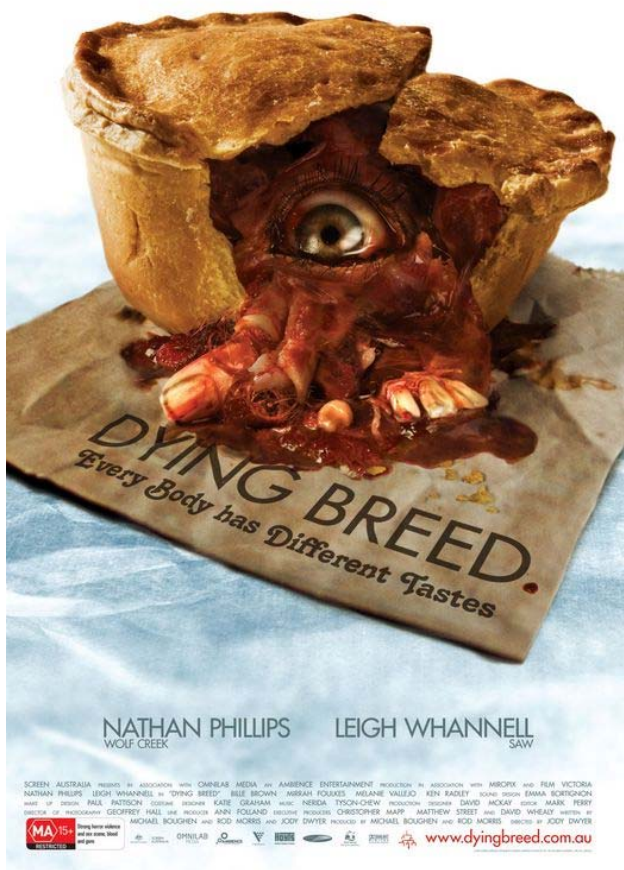
unnecessary violence and cult cinema violence is the conventions of cult cinema. There is something within the way cult cinema works as a genre that differentiates it from normal cinema. While it has a plot, it is normally ludicrous, characters are usually unusual if not sometimes perverse and the presentation of the world clearly makes it stand out from "the real world". In this situation extreme violence and sex becomes somewhat of a caricature of itself. If we consider *Ilsa: She Wolf of the S.S.* (1975) made on the set of Hogan's Heroes, while extreme in its violence, sex and torture, it is so obviously outside the realm of reality that it screams "genre cinema" and hence we approach the



content in a different way. The history of cult cinema is filled with violent films from women in prison titles to Naziploitation and horror however each follows a certainly convention that puts it outside traditional horror and hence allows us to experience the violence at a distance. In Australian cinema this trend was especially notable during the Seventies ozploitation craze with such titles as *Turkey Shoot* (1982) and with more recent cult releases as *I know how many runs you scored last Summer* (2008) and the classic *Dying Breed* (2008).

Humour

Humour is also a mitigating factor with violence in horror cinema, it plays a large role with cult and genre cinema and in many horror films is able to transform very extreme violence into a parody of itself. A prime example is Peter Jackson's early film *Braindead* aka *Dead Alive* (1992). It is a tale of oedipal terror when a ra-





ther introverted young man dominated by his mother finds how terrible she can become. When she is bitten by a Sumatran rat-monkey she dies, returning as some sort of monster who eats everything and everyone in sight. The violence is extreme with an incredible level of guts and gore and yet the use of genre cinema conventions and loads of dark humour make it an enjoyable and unusual work of cinema. Another good example is the *Evil Dead* series, combining unusual special effects, comic violence and gore; they create a good horror experience and vary the violence with humour. Often the use of humour in such a manner increases the effect of the horror as you build and build tension, laugh and release it only to be hit by a shock in the form of gore or violence. Such a use of humour and violence shows a sophisticated understanding of horror and is far superior to simply gore for its own sake.

Seventies Horror

As technology in cinema developed so did the use of more explicit violence and sex. One of the major developments in Seventies horror was the use of the "jump". The jump is where tension is increased continually through a series of anti-climaxes until finally a kill is revealed and you nearly jump off the edge of your chair ! This



technique was used throughout the genre which became known as the Slasher film and was extremely successful. Watching them now with a more critical eye they were not as explicit or violent as they seemed at the time, it was the psychological tension that was developed and this added to the available techniques of horror filmmakers.

At the same time more explicit sex and violence did reach the big screen especially with the range of "teen" horror series such as *Friday 13th*, *Hellraiser*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween*. While each of these films had increased violence they were nothing compared to much that has followed today. While the plots wore thin as each series continued, on the whole they were marked by fairly developed storylines, good character development and interesting twists and turns. Many film critics see the late Sixties and early Seventies as the heyday of horror cinema as more violence could be shown but filmmakers still worked to have a reasonable plot and believable characters. If you compare *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* of 1974 with its more modern "sequels" you can see the truly innovative nature of the



original and the lackadaisical nature of the sequels which rely way too much on gore and violence.

Ultra Violence

When it comes to ultra-violence I believe there is a simple equation, the higher level of violence the more expertise is required. By definition this means a stronger plot and better character development. Extreme violence has been used quite effectively for many years indeed *Witchfinder General* (1968) directed by Michael Reeves and starring Vincent Price, Ian Ogilvy, and Hilary Dwyer, shocked many viewers with its scenes of torture and is still quite startling today.

Too often today both Hollywood and Indie filmmakers seem to think that ultra-violence is enough to make a film. It seems many believe it is a possible path to success to shock your audience with rape, disembowelment and viscera and hope this makes a name for yourself. As discussed at the start of this article horror works by creating a “fear” reaction which is a fight or



flight response. This is very different from want to a “want to throw up” reaction. Torture and extreme violence can be used to great effect and I will give a few examples but unless they are in context they simply turn people off who in turn will turn the film off!

Let us look at three films which I believe use extreme violence to great effect in the context of challenging plots and with solid character development.

Frontier(s) (2007) is a challenging and unusual French horror using the backdrop of political tension to create quite a powerful tale. A new, very right-wing President has just been elected. There is rioting in the streets of Paris which is ruthlessly suppressed by the Police. Yasmine, her brother and a couple of friends are involved in a robbery, but get caught up in the rioting. They are fleeing the police when Yasmine’s brother is shot. She and one of the gang take her dying brother to hospital, but must flee as the police come to question them.

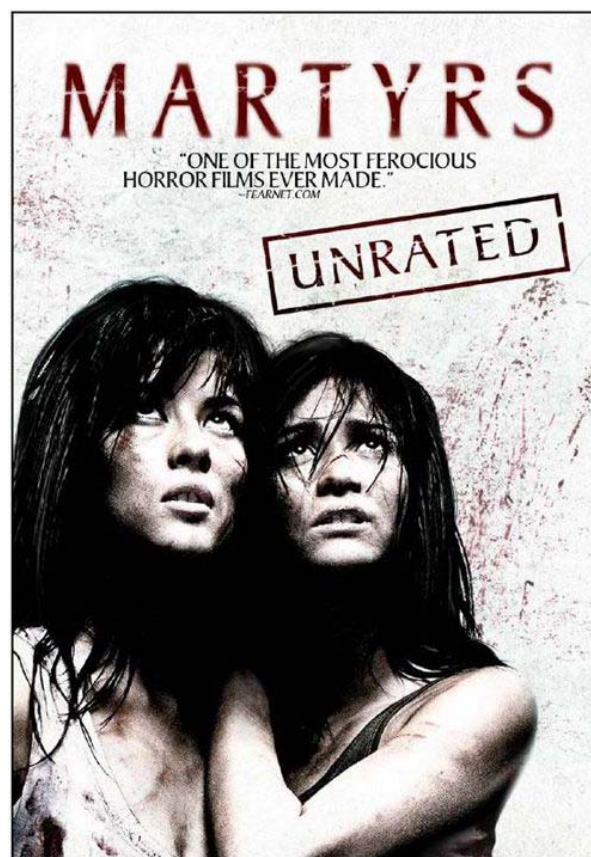
The other two have fled for the Dutch border





with a large amount of cash. They have stopped overnight at a remote motel. They are distracted by the owner's sexy daughters Gilberte and Klaudia, but notice during dinner that there is something very strange going on. Things turn nasty. The ex-Nazi German owner's family and the local policeman have some sort of deal going. They prey on travellers, both for the loot and for food (they are cannibals). Tom is brutally bashed and it is left to the other boy, Farid, to save them. They are captured and imprisoned in an old mine. It appears to be infested with some sort of terribly mutated humanoids.

Meanwhile Yasmine and her friend have also left Paris and headed for the Dutch border, and they have reached the same motel. When confronted by the family, they try to leave, but are taken prisoner. The father announces that Yasmine will be used to breed with one of the family's sons. Her friend will be fed to the pigs or the mutants. He has been hamstrung to stop him escaping until they are ready to butcher him. Yasmine, however, manages to dig her way out of the cell. Farid has escaped again, and has found Tom's body strung up ready to be butch-



ered. Although he was the weakest of the group, he is now starting to find an inner strength in the need for survival. Will it be enough to save him and the others? Yasmine is recaptured by one of the brothers. Will she survive? There are conflicts within the family – can she exploit these? The finale is bloody and the outcome unexpected.

Director Xavier Jens keeps the tension high right through the film. The political subplot is really just a sideplay, leaving a cold barebones horror plot with a lot of opportunities for the actors to give their best. There are many clichés in this film – such as the runaway saved by the traveller in the car, who turns out to be one of the Nazi family – but it's all done so well that you can excuse this and enjoy the film. It starts in a fairly quiet but menacing way, but by the end of the story there is as much gore as you could want. Jens has shown restraint though. Rather than buckets of blood continuing ad nauseum, the splatter only goes on sufficiently to support the plot. Unlike many U.S. films of this genre, the plot is more important than the violence yet violence is used to optimum effect.

Martyrs (2008) is another excellent example of the intelligent use of violence in a film, in this



case very extreme violence. It is truly a unique experience. It is harrowing, confronting and visceral. It is often difficult to watch and hard to bear yet it keeps you glued to the scene though you are shocked, if not horrified by what you see. Many people will find this film too much to handle, its themes are powerful and confronting, its violence graphic and the underlying psychological motifs deliberately provocative. In my mind this all adds up to a truly awe inspiring work of cinema; it may not be easy to watch and it is not enjoyable in the traditional sense of the word, but it challenges in the way that true "at the edge" cinema should do.

When the film was presented at film festivals during 2007, many viewers walked out and it is rumoured some even threw up in the aisles. Whether this is true or simple hype, I wouldn't necessarily be surprised by such reactions as this is an extreme film. At the same time reviewers who denounced this film as torture porn are doing the director, Pascal Laugier a grave disservice. The term torture porn should be understood in relation of the second word in the term, porn. Porn is the display of biological functions without context. Torture porn is a modern trend, primarily in US horror films, which uses extreme violence including torture and mutilation purely for effect without much context or plot. *Martyrs* is exactly the opposite to this. It is one of the first films I have seen where every display of extreme and sometimes brutal violence (and there is a whole lot of it) is justified by the plot. This is a film saturated with meaning. Just some of the themes explored include the effects of abuse and torture, self-mutilation, psychosis and mental illness, religious and political extremism and even love and affection between those damaged by their life experience.

Laugier deliberately leaves the true meaning of *Martyrs* undefined and you can read the film in



many different ways. On one level it is an exploration of how far religious extremists will go to achieve evidence of life after death, on another the stupidity of valuing suffering and pain over accepting life as it is. The crux seems to be the speech given in the middle of the film where martyrdom is extolled as a virtue and all manner of torture and suffering used to justify





achieving “transfiguration”. While the organization which coordinates these “experiments” is not named, its use of the term “transfiguration” (a Christian term used within mysticism) and its emphasis on young girls being the best subjects seems to hint at Roman Catholicism. At the same time the breeding of martyrs could equally be applied to certain sects of Islam. In any event it is a fairly sustained attack on the fanaticism that results from emphasizing a supposed life after death over this one.

Within the context of this larger picture, which really only becomes clear half way through the film, there is an exploration of the horrific effects of abuse. For the first 50 minutes of *Martyrs* we experience the truly harrowing suffering which Lucie is going through trying to find those who abused her. During this period Laugier sustains the mystery as to whether the cuts, bruises and violence visited on Lucie's body are the result of intra psychic psychosis (within her mind) or caused by a dead girl which is haunting her. The effect of her psychosis is heightened when we juxtaposition it to the plight of Anna who truly loves Lucie and tries to help her but realizes their lives are dangerously out of control.

Lucie brutally slaughters a family as she believes the husband and wife were her captors, Anna is not so sure. Lucie's inner torment becomes so extreme that she inflicts all manner of

abuse on herself, scenes which are uncomfortable and painful to watch. This is when the film begins to switch gears and it is a testimony to Laugier that he is able to move between what at first seems to be a revenge film to something altogether more frightening. Lucie loses control when she realizes Anna does not believe her and believing that the dead girl is trying to kill her actually kills her, a sad and harrowing end to her life.

As Anna finds the hidden laboratory under the house (and begs Lucie's dead body forgiveness) she confronts not only a further victim but the mysterious organization behind it all. We start to get an inkling of what they want as they extol the value of martyrdom and suffering. Soon Anna will know firsthand as she becomes the focus of their experiments.

The scenes of torture and abuse now become quite overwhelming. While they are certainly justified in the context of the story they are hard to watch. It would be fair to say that if these scenes did not have any meaning then we could criticize the director for using gratuitous violence, however, they do lead somewhere. The ending is astounding and leaves us pause to think. The way in which a range of themes are interwoven together to create a challenging and thought provoking film is impressive. The acting is superb; the score is haunting and the cinematography excellent. There are little things which have such an effect such as the fact that the “normal” family living an average life upstairs with their kids, one of which is a local swimming champ, at the same can rub a torture den downstairs all in the name of some form of extreme ideology.

I consider *Martyrs* a masterful work of cinema; it explores a range of intriguing and provocative ideas in a way that literally kicks you in the guts. It is one thing to contemplate issues relat-



ing to abuse and the effect of ideology theoretically, it is another to have it seen through the eyes of its helpless victims. This is courageous filmmaking and if you are willing to take the journey you will be rewarded, but it will not be an easy ride.

Dead Girl (2009) is another excellent example of an extremely violent film but which has an exceptional plot and leaves you debating about the nature of teen sexuality and peer pressure.

Dead Girl caused maximum controversy when it was shown on the film festival circuit and on DVD it is just as confronting. Is this simply a misogynist, violent zombie film or is it a lot more? Certainly the sex and violence is shocking and the sheer misogyny at times takes your breath away, but there is something under the surface here. This is not just an extreme exploitation movie; it is a film reflecting on the nature of suppressed male sexuality and the dangers of peer pressure.

Two dumb, dislikeable teen boys (Rickie and J.T.) skip school and armed with some brews head for an abandoned mental institution to get pissed and do some damage. They both have had little luck with relationships with girls (not especially surprising considering their characters) and express their frustration by tearing the



building apart. As they get more and more drunk they decide to explore the tunnels under the institution and when attacked by a wild dog, need to find a way to escape quickly. They find a locked door and behind it is a naked bruised woman, covered in plastic chained to a table.

While they screw her in every orifice, rent her out to their friends and generally egg each other on to use her in every possible way, the sense of utter depersonalization could not be better displayed on screen. While it certainly is extreme cinema, it is also reflecting on such significant issues as the sexual suppression of teen sexuality, peer pressure and depersonalization and the way in which the focus of sexual attraction can be reduced to an object and nothing more.

The psycho-sexual horror of the film is matched by the filming, a dark urban landscape, disintegrating buildings, an emphasis on shadows, night and darkness. There are regular long and slow camera shots over pipes, dilapidated halls and broken windows, doors, rooms and equipment.

I can fully appreciate the shock many people may take to this film; we are dealing with long periods of necrophilic rape and torture combined with obnoxious teen dialogue. At the same time the physical state of the woman deteriorates with each scene as her wounds don't heal and the violence increases, this is not easy to watch.

At the same time everything has its consequences and there are side effects from being bitten by the "dead girl" and when she escapes she certainly recks havoc. There are some powerful motifs in the film if you can handle the





sheer brutality of the subject matter. As the boys become more and more reduced by their violence they decide to kidnap a “live girl” since the dead one is not longer in optimum condition. The way in which they have become totally dehumanized by their experience of violence and “objectivization” is viscerally presented. At the same time the way in which the “dead girl” being reduced to an animal now responds as an animal suggests the effects of violence and abuse. We never really come to understand how she has become what she is, but at the end when a new live girl is strapped to the table we come to consider whether this “zombie state” is a symbol for the ultimate form of consumer sex object.

Dead Girl is not an easy film, debates rage about its content, dialogue and misogyny, at the same time there is always the danger of a film being so “loud” that we lose its message. At times I think this is true with *Dead Girl*, the imagery is so severe that many people will not dig below the surface and consider some of the significant motifs underneath.

Each of these films shows how extreme violence can be used in a meaningful way to challenge an audience providing a form of entertainment which may be difficult to watch but thought provoking.

The first film to be called “torture porn” was *Hostel* (2005) by critic David Edelstein and it is hard not to agree. The *Hostel* series is a classic example where a film has high production values but little plot and characters which trigger no response from the viewer, good or otherwise. The



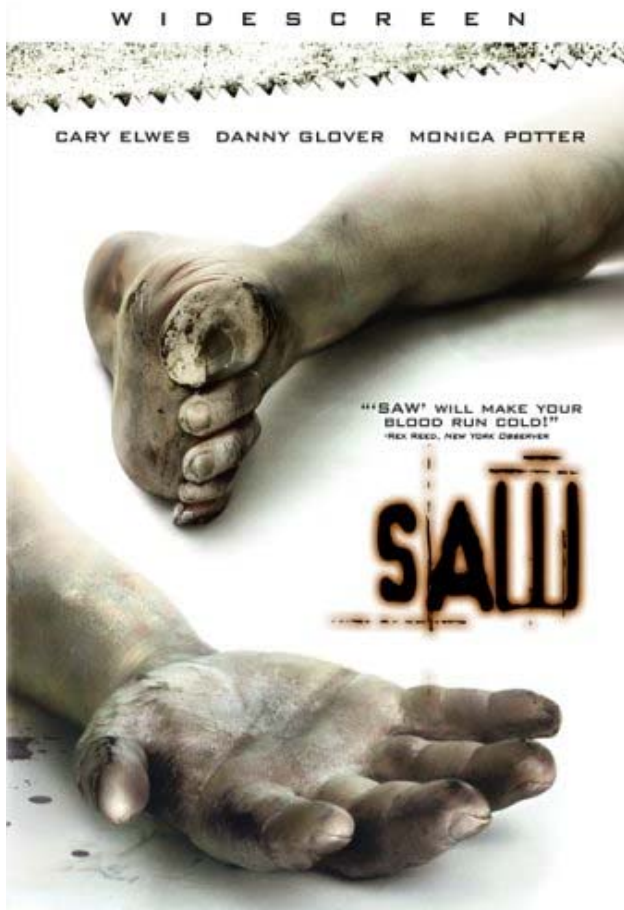
story is essentially about dumb young men in search of a good time who are told of a great hostel in Bratislava, Slovakia. When they arrive they are tortured in every possible manner and their goods stolen. There is little to recommend it and it is artistically without merit, sadly it triggered a flood of similar films which tried to out-do it. Other similar films include *Paradise Lost* (*Turistas*) 2006 and *Captivity* (2007). Such films seem to think that by showing explicit torture the horror of what is depicting on screen will carry the film and create an interesting viewing experience, it doesn't.

As more and more of these types of films were churned out by Hollywood many critics began to wonder about the merit of connecting sex and violence in such an explicit manner. While sex and violence can be used within a film with solid plot and character development, these films seemed to simply indulge the most base desire to see people raped and tortured for pleasure. While I have no interest in making a moral evaluation of such films, from an artistic perspective they are simply bad cinema. They do not trigger a good “fear” response but simply create a feeling of nausea as human bodies are reduced to their constituent parts.

An example of a series which falls between the two extremes is the *Saw* films. *Saw* began as a low budget horror film created by Australian filmmakers James Wan and Leigh Whannell. Wan and Whannell meet in film school and together produced a short film to showcase their concept for a new type of horror film. Whannell

wrote the script and Wan directed and they produced it on a shoestring budget. To keep costs down Whannell himself played the main character of Adam. The sheer originality of the concept landed them a deal before they even landed in Los Angeles and the Saw franchise was born.

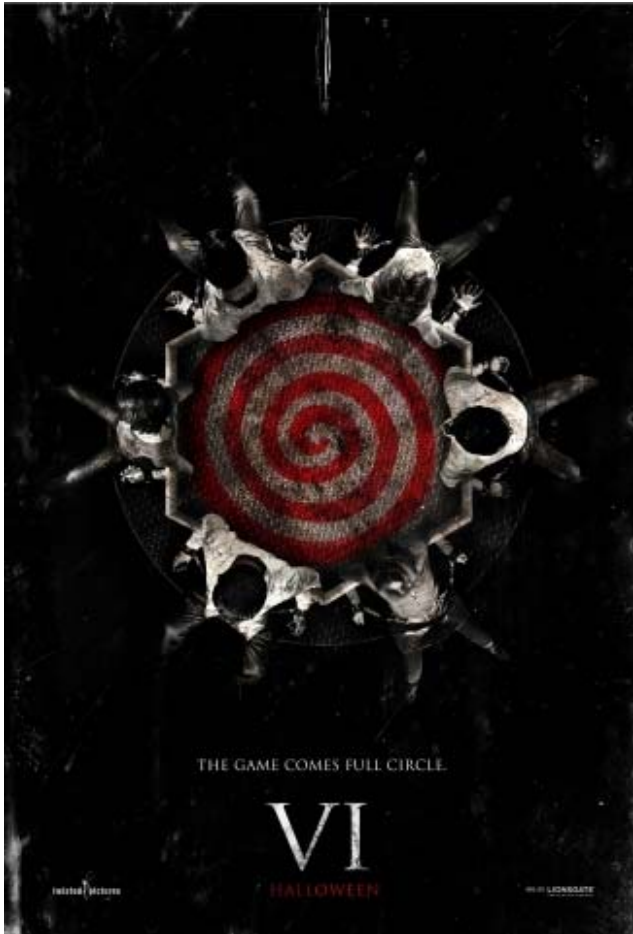
At present there are six films and a 3D release in the franchise which centres on the character of John Kramer who is known as the "Jigsaw Killer". He is a unique form of serial killer and this is what sells the films. Jigsaw is not a random killer nor is he driven by psycho sexual desires or financial motives. In many ways he is not even a traditional psychopath, he is a killer with a very definite purpose and does not see himself as a murderer. He creates tests using intricate traps for his victims, all of which are criminals of some form or another. These tests force them to re-evaluate their lives through extreme pain and suffering, in most cases involving some form of self-mutilation. If they fail, they die and the vast majority do. In Jigsaw's mind this is how it should be; most of them lack the nobility to take responsibility for themselves even if their lives are at risk and so they are not great loss.



In *Saw IV* we get some background on why John Kramer became the Jigsaw Killer. Kramer was a highly successful engineer and encouraged his wife Jill to pursue her own interests. She had a strong social conscience and ran a drug rehabilitation clinic. John had his doubts about her safety but did not want to curtail her freedom. He also believed that most of the drug addicts who used her clinic are not reformed by what was offered. They simply became more reliant on others and ended up as an unnecessary cost to society. After she is mugged at the clinic by drug addict Cecil Jill loses their baby and John finds himself in a deep depressive malaise. He becomes more and more of a loner and slowly they drift apart and are divorced. However, John still loves Jill and cannot forget what has happened to their relationship and their one chance at having a child. He cannot let go of his bitterness and his anger towards those who freeloader off life increases.

John is diagnosed with cancer and when he finds it is inoperable he attempts suicide. His attempt fails but he has a new perspective on the world. He begins to realize that only through a confrontation with death will people wake up. He also decides that change must begin with the individual not with external penal and reform systems. The seeds of Jigsaw are





born and Cecil is his first test case. The name Jigsaw comes from the piece of flesh he cuts from each victim symbolizing that something is missing from each of their lives.

Jigsaw now devises more and more complex and refined methods of testing his victims. In each case they have the opportunity to survive, and this is the essence of the Jigsaw method, but at a great physical cost. In many cases the tests have strange ironic significance in relation to the victim's lives and there is a constant psychological as well as physical testing of each victim.

The unique character of Jigsaw is what makes the Saw franchise so fascinating and indeed so successful. While we may not advocate the sort of violence Jigsaw indirectly inflicts on his victims, he is not an insane killer, but someone who is working from a sense of meaning and this challenges and intrigues the viewer. Everyone has had a moment when they have become infuriated with those who abuse themselves and those around them and the character of Jigsaw embodies this frustration. His is a mixture of a preacher of pain and home grown vigilante.

The plot of each film also brings together a range of popular cinema genres. The Saw films have a serial killer as their nexus who is also a type of vigilante and here alone we have two of the more popular cinematic genres – serial killers (and horror) and vigilantes/revenge films. At the same time there is the ongoing police detective drama as the team tries to find Jigsaw and hence Saw taps into the ongoing public obsession with crime and police cinema and TV. The complexity of the plot of each film keeps the audience guessing and hence has a lot in common with classic whodunit films. This mixture of genres made Saw a fascinating success, however as the series continued problems intervened. After Jigsaw is killed in Saw III various plot twists are used to continue to the series. These work for a while but by Saw XI and Saw 3D they are failing. As the plot becomes more and more convoluted and the characters less credible, the emphasis on torture and violence increases exponentially. By the time we get to the last Saw film the intriguing devices used to extract “meaning” have been replaced by simple torture machines and the gore level has been increased to such a level that the series has lost all credibility. Saw is an example how an excellent idea which uses torture and extreme violence to tell a powerful tale can be continued way too long and simply becomes the basest form of torture porn.

Horror in World Cinema

Violence in foreign films needs to be considered differently due to cultural sensitivities. For example, in Japan there is little problem showing very extreme violent but sex is still a major censorship problem. Asian extreme horror films are unusual in that they often have a well-developed plot and the violence is simply presented within the context of the story. This being said when Hong Kong introduced a Catego-

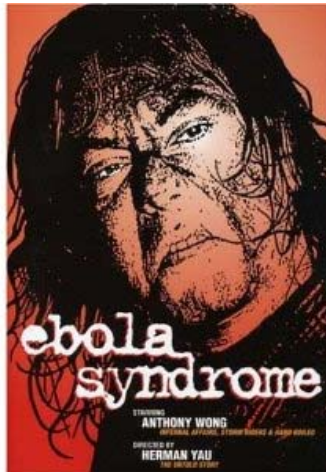


ry 3 rating in 1988, a range of very extreme horror films began to surface which seemed aimed at the Western market and hence revelled in sex and violence. Examples include *Men Behind the Sun* (1988), *Dr. Lamb* (1992), *The Untold Story* (1993) and *Ebola Syndrome* (1996).

Ebola Syndrome (1996) is a good example of a Hong Kong Category 3 film. It is difficult to classify since it has an excellent plot, good character development yet is totally mean spirited, ultra-violent and extreme.

Ebola Syndrome is a film that polarises viewers, it has been described as nauseating, sleazy and offensive and regardless of how you view the gore and violence, the plot has certainly been written for maximum impact. This is Hong Kong cinema at the edge.

Kai has a short fuse; he has been pushed around all of his life and reacts with a disproportionate level of fury when harassed. The film opens when he is having a fling with the boss's wife; it seems this is a very regular occurrence when the boss is away - initiated by his rather bored and spoilt wife. However, this time the boss comes home early and catches them in the wrong moment. The wife pleads innocence and he begins to kick the hell out of Kai. He pulls a knife and demands Kai castrate himself, instead Kai screams "Stop Bullying Me!" (a recurring phrase throughout the film) and brutally kills the boss, his offsider and his wife. He



goes to finish the job by dousing the bosses' daughter in fuel, but when interrupted he runs for his life. He is now wanted for triple murder so he flees to South Africa to work cheaply in a Chinese restaurant. They know his past and use him for cheap labour and he has no choice but to accept the conditions he is under. Once again the boss pays him cheaply and the boss's wife abuses him.

Being Chinese in South Africa is not easy, the White population treat them as Blacks and the Blacks see them as whites, Kai's fuse is slowly being lit. Since the local butchers are charging the restaurant a fortune for meat, they travel to Zulu territory to buy some pig carcasses. The village has been devastated by some sort of virus and the tribe is undertaking a rite of cleansing, they buy the carcasses and get out of there quick. On the way back, Kai crashes into a tree and after a clash with the boss stamps off in fury. He finds a local African woman semi-comatose and clearly unwell by the riverside and decides to make the most of it – that's the sort of guy Kai is. During the rape she has some sort of convulsion and so he has to smash her head in to escape her "grip". I did mention this was a mean spirited film!

When they return Kai develops a fever but, of course, they cannot take him to a hospital. The





doctor gives them some medicine but with further research warns them of the Ebola risk. However, Kai seems to get better. However, if truth be known, Kai is one of the rare people (one in ten million) who the virus does not kill but turns into carriers.

Things go from bad to worse when the bosses' wife decides to dump him in the forest to avoid being caught with his body if he dies from the illness. This pushes him too far. He yells " Stop Bullying Me!" and attacks her, beats her and rapes her, when the husband returns home and interrupts, he brutally kills him (using the restaurant's doors no less) and then returns to finish the wife. He also kills a cousin who turns up while he is cleaning up the mess. Kai then drags them into the kitchen and using a electric blade turns them into "African Burgers" which he sells as a new product line...

Just as he thinks he has it made, the child who survived his first rampage (now an adult), identifies him and so he must make a quick escape to Hong Kong. Of course, this is not before a major outbreak of Ebola in Johannesburg, but by the time it is traced to the restaurant he is a long way away and the virus is fast spreading...

This is a dark, vicious and violent film. Anthony Wong as Kai is impressively monstrous, while we may try to develop some sympathy for his plight as someone who had been "pushed too



far" by life, it is next to impossible to do so. He is just too sleazy and revolting. The film itself is packed by sex, bodily fluids, gore, violence and death. The plot seem deliberately written to shock and appal with nobody spared.

That being said there are some intriguing themes. Class, for example, is explored, as Kai is clearly used and abused by those who have money, from his first boss and his wife, to his second boss at the Chinese Restaurant. There is also a powerful portrayal of Chinese life in South Africa during the Apartheid period.

Obviously quite a bit of research was undertaken on Ebola and this shows throughout the film ranging from the perfectly played sense of fear and paranoia to the depictions of the virus



spreading via bodily fluids and of course the autopsy. While there is lots of violence, the mood is enhanced by powerfully simple images such as Kai coughing or people simply falling and shaking in convulsion. The mood of the *Ebola Syndrome* is as powerful as the effects and violence.

Ebola Syndrome will challenge many; it is shocking, violent and filled with gore. However, it creates a superb sense of dread and paranoia and is packed with such dislikeable characters and written with such a mean spirited plot that it is actually quite a unique piece of "extreme cinema." Whether the level of violence matches the story is hard to decide so I leave it to the viewer.

World cinema has certainly embraced extreme violence from the films of Lars von Trier to *Hell's Ground* (2007) the first Pakistani gore horror film. Many have a higher level of plot than their American equivalents but as the financial value of torture porn increases on the market many are seduced by quick bucks and lower their sights. A recent example is the Dutch film *The Human Centipede* (2010) which focuses on a doctor who wants to surgically alter girls into a

human centipede by connecting them mouth to arse. I don't even think I will bother commenting on that one. But I suppose one man's woman is another man's centipede. A sequel is coming soon.



The Future of Horror

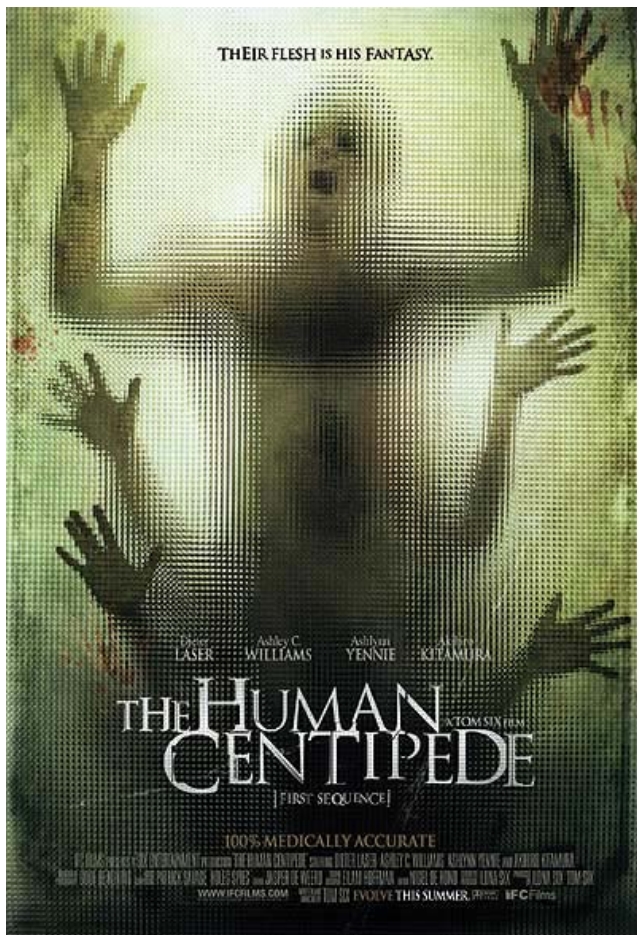
To a large extent I do believe that Hollywood has become quite moribund. It seems to be churning out remakes or jumps on a spe-



cific bandwagon (such as torture porn) and does it to death (pun intended). At the same time cinema from around the world is, in the main, exploring new themes and developing at lightning speed. The American film company Mondo Macabro distributes and incredible range of cult and horror world cinema which shows just how sophisticated the market has become, while Severin has been remastering interesting older cult and horror titles. It is interesting that some of the more impressive extreme horror films such as *Frontiers* and *Martyrs* were both French and the development of extreme horror by the French seems to be encouraging.

I believe that the only way horror as a genre can survive is if it returns to solid plots, good storytelling and well developed characters. The issues of sex and ultra violence are, to me, minor ones, as long as a film has a good story I don't really care about sex (or lack of it) or the level of gore.

The key is that a good script must be prepared first, not a list of gross out scenes via which the filmmaker thinks will make him a name ! If we return to making good films then the nature of the violence or sex becomes of little significance.





TRENDS IN HORROR CINEMA

People love to be scared. One of our greatest emotions is the almost instinctive fear of the dark and that which we can't see, the unknown, that lurks in the dark. There may be a malevolent entity of some sort, waiting for us. We are powerless against such horrors. Since the earliest films horror themes have been popular and many have played to these fears. It is a way to relive our nightmares in safety but still experience the vicarious thrill.



Pre-WWII

The early films had the disadvantage of no sound so the director had to make do with moody sets, menacing acting and careful lighting. The vampire scenes in *Nosferatu* lost nothing by being silent. In the near dark the appearance of the vampire hinted at evil afoot. This is one of the most important parts of a good horror film – hints are provided but the viewer's imagination is left to fill in the rest. Much of this subtlety is lost in current films where CGI can make up for suggestion. Why suggest it when you can show it in full, blood-dripping colour?

During the 1930s the U.S. horror industry took off, drawing for its stories on classic European literature that was based (partly) on folk legends. Films like *Dracula* (1931) gave many viewers the horror experience for the first time.

Three plotlines developed from the popular literature. The first was the man-made monster (Frankenstein's monster) and it quickly petered out – after all, after you have killed him a few times he can't just keep reappearing. A chance



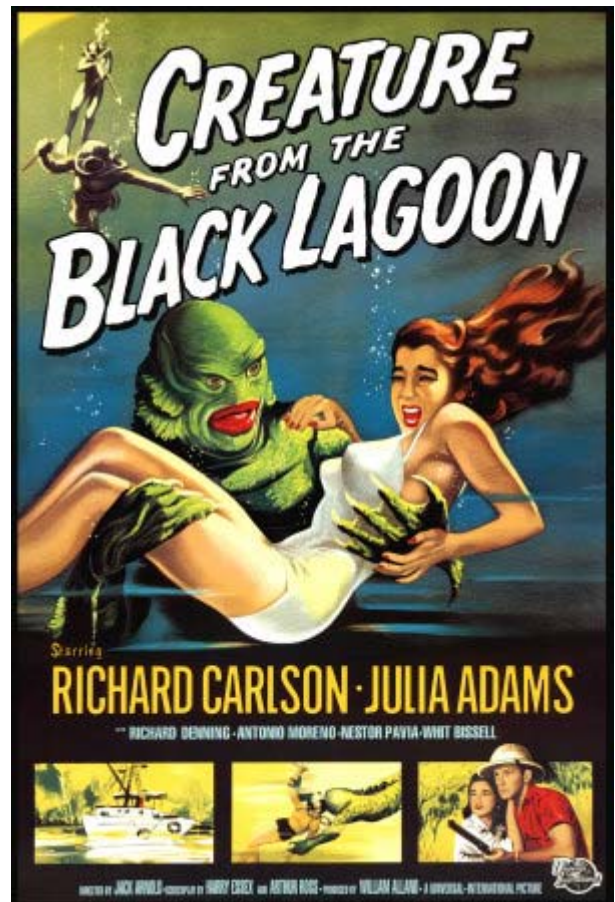
to make a modern revival of the style was available when the sciences of atomic physics, germ warfare and genetics became more widely known. The monster could now be a tiny bug or an amorphous all-consuming blob from outer space. The mad scientist, who almost disappeared from film after *Frankenstein*, now found a new place in horror growing these creatures regardless of the side effects.

The werewolf was another effective subject but surprisingly few films starred this creature. Limits of special effects meant the werewolf was just a man in shaggy dog suit.

Vampires were easier. Give an actor a cape, some pale makeup and false fangs and you have a vampire.

1950s, 1960s

This was the truly schlock period of horror. The mass market after World War II demanded more and more films so we had unlikely-looking creatures from *The Black Lagoon* / *The Desert* / *Outer Space* / *Beneath the Sea* / *The Haunted Sea* and so on, usually depicted on the posters carrying off a scantily clad young woman. There



was little true horror involved, though, or perhaps that is just how it looks now. It's hard to be scared of a man in a bad rubber suit. The films became regarded as humour rather than horror and the cry "Look out ! Behind you !" would be echoed by half the theatre in some of the worst films. The SF monsters were recent given the serve they deserved in Christopher R Mihm's wonderful parodies *It Came From Outer*





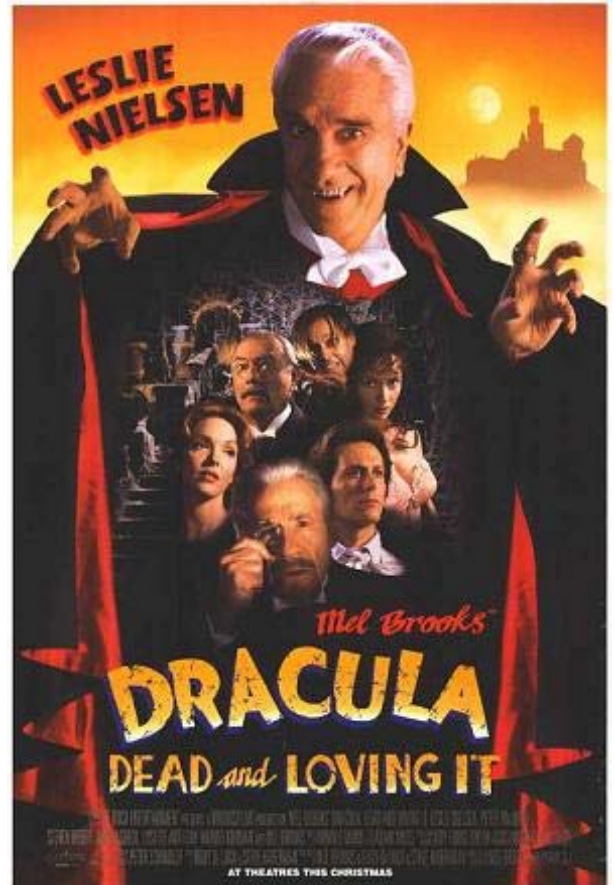
Space and *The Monster of Phantom Lake*.

We also got the early Creature Features in the post-War period. It seemed that every animal on the planet was being mutated by radiation or by mad scientists into a giant form. Once again the films developed into farce rather than horror, culminating in my favourite piece of schlock *Night of the Lepus* (1972). *Lepus Cuniculus* is the common bunny rabbit and somehow they just didn't work as savage carnivores.

The 1970s – 1980s

This style of schlock horror filled the cinemas and drive-ins in the 1950s until the Production Code of America restrictions were lifted in 1964. This opened up another line of plot, the occult. Portals opening to another world allowed all sorts of demons in. It took a while but we got classic horror once again in films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973).

The vampire was renovated. Successive directors and writers added to the vampire character-



istics until we had the characteristic Peter Cushing-type vampire. He would be suave, urbane, rich, mysterious, and strangely attractive to lightly-clad young women. Wouldn't we all be like that if we had the chance? Veteran actor Leslie Nielsen got his chance in the spoof *Dead and Loving It* (1995). It included all the clichés that the style was prone to. It was not Nielsen's greatest film but it was a great spoof. The Hammer films from Britain were more in the line of professional horror during this period than the inane offerings from the U.S. in the later part of the period. Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein??? Hammer films were often rather clichéd but were well made and effective as horror.

Hammer also revived the religious aspect. The excesses of Dark Ages religion have provided good horror fodder. Evil priests and vicious witchfinders put scantily clad young women to the torture or the stake.

Hammer's films were far ahead of the American schlock and they came to redefine the genres, but often at the expense of a bit more blood and more body parts than really necessary. At least they didn't skimp on the scantily clad young women.



(Perhaps there's a movie there? Revenge of the Scantly Clad Young Women ? The film poster should be a collector's item.)

Where there is a vampire there will be a vampire-killer and the battle between the killers and the vampires is a form of horror by itself. Vampire-killer stories abound but the most successful has been *Blade* (1998). Popular though it is, this film encompasses all the worst features and clichés of the genre – minimal plot, lots of (CGI) blood, unlikely weapons and a really cool looking leather-wearing hero. There is a certain amount of horror but basically it is an action film.

Finally the werewolf was reinvented, sometimes with a new approach. Often psychologically marked by his changing nature, the werewolf was usually depicted as a creature of the dark, of uncontrolled savagery. Some were aware of their condition and made desperate efforts to overcome it. The classic 1935 *Werewolf of London* has been remade many times.

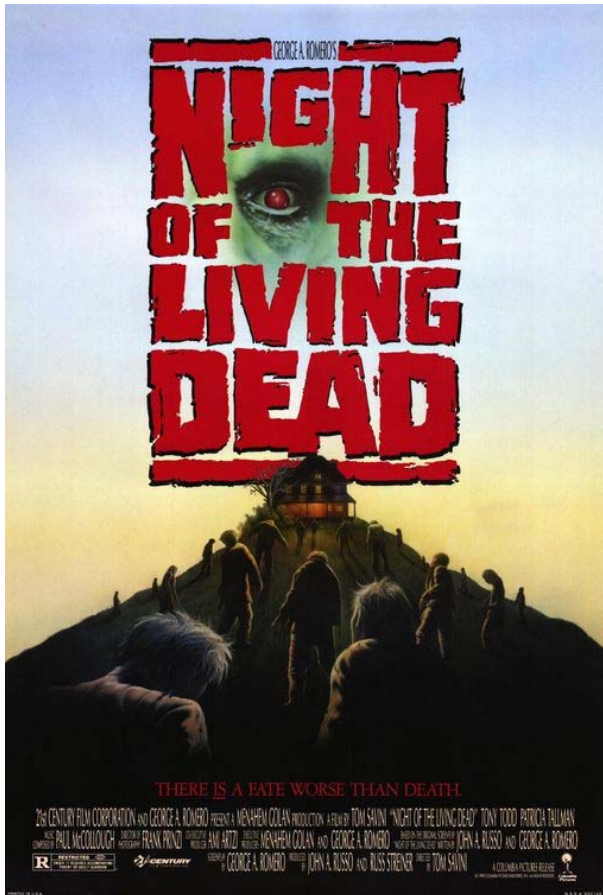
Most of the horror films disappeared after the '60s, wiped out by the insatiable demand for blockbusters. From a filmmaker's point of view



CGI effects were cheaper than live action and computer-generated blood was less messy than the corn-syrup-and-food-colouring type, so CGI was exploited heavily. This left nothing to the imagination and the few horror films of this period were rather flat and boring. Many of the horror threads died with a whimper but some went out with a bang like Peter Jackson's great homage to King Kong.

Some stories were successful enough to carry on, like the hit *Halloween* (1978), *Friday The 13th* (1980) and Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The horror in these was so far above the mass films that they deserved





their success. For the rest, the film companies began to concentrate on slasher films with little horror content but buckets of blood. College students began to replace scantily clad young maidens as slasher fodder. The few occasional gems like Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1981) films and the immortal and much-copied *Jaws* (1975) stood out against the blood soaked mass.

One new thread appeared in this period – zombies. Following the success of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) the shambling reanimated flesh-eaters have become the stuff of many horror films. They are

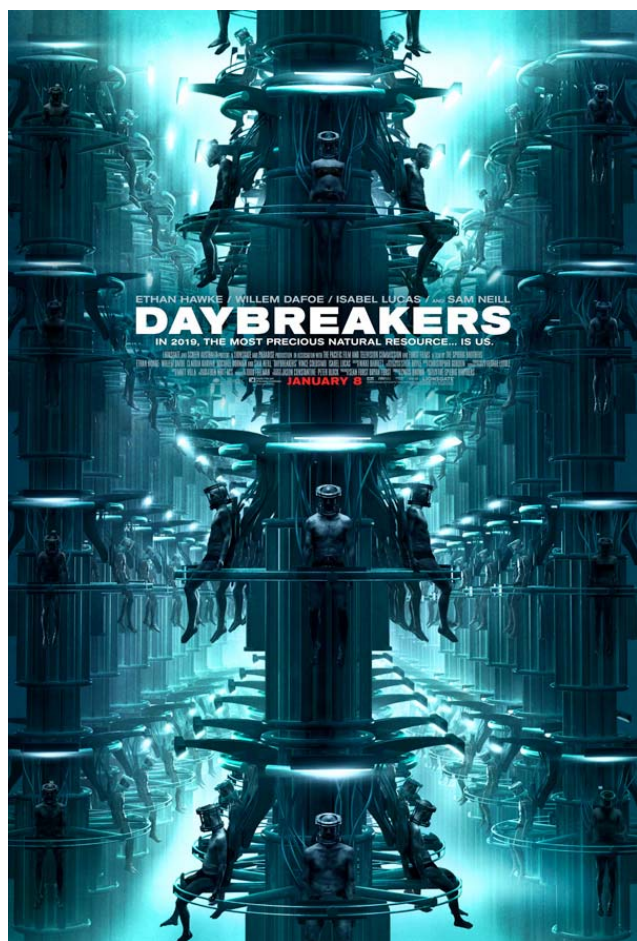


not particularly horrible in themselves (after all, you can just run away from them) but there are so many and they lurk in unexpected dark places, giving the surprise element so vital to a good horror film. Skilful lighting adds atmosphere to a film and a small number of directors managed to recreate the ominous mood of *Nosferatu*. Most films, though, were standard unimaginative independent fare. One zombie offering that stands out is the British film *Dead Set* (2008). A group of mostly unlikeable people locked in a TV reality show house are attacked when most of Britain turns into zombies. A lot of the horror content is in the reactions of the contestants to impending death. We see the inherent evil of people under pressure. You feel that some of them would happily feed all the other contestants to the zombies if it helped their own survival.

A classic spoof of the genre is the superb *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). Being spoofed is probably the ultimate accolade for any genre.

1990s – 2000s

Into the 90's there was still a following of the traditional styles of horror. The 90s were the time of the sequel and some showed little imagination and nothing original. The best work was mostly from the little independent producers.



So was the worst. Every aspiring director wanted to make a zombie film – they just wouldn't give up on these. Most were still clichéd and boring and as a reviewer I searched often for any small spark of originality in a new film. They certainly lost out on horror in favour of splatter and as the audiences grew up they started to want something with a bit more thought in it. They found this in the science fiction genre that was going through a CGI-led renaissance.

Many producers now demand more realism or a more imaginative slant on the old themes. These range from zombies that can actually break into a run to vampires that rule the world.

The traditional evils live on, though. *Daybreakers* (2009) takes the vampire legend to a new level, proposing that vampires have now taken over the planet and are farming humans for blood. What happens when there is not enough blood being produced from the remaining humans and the “food riots” begin? This film is true horror at its best, especially if you are one of the few remaining free humans. I wonder did Sam Neill ever see himself playing a vampire before this film?



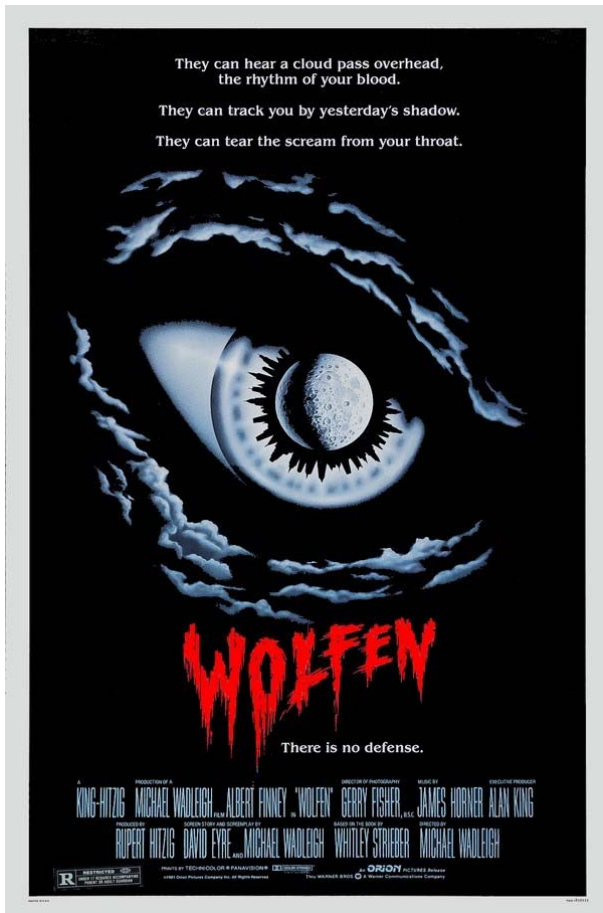
Urban fantasy

In modern literature there are many horror and creature novels written for the new, aware and critical teenage market. They put traditional horror subjects in a more modern urban environment and give them a whole new range of typical teenage problems to deal with. This Urban Fantasy trend has been slow to cross over into cinema. The most noteworthy success so far has been the *Twilight* series, the first film of which was issued in 2008. A cross-genre style written fairly obviously for teens, it covers the lives and loves of three youngsters. One of the boys is a vampire, the other is a werewolf. The two species have reached a truce but the two boys' love for the same human girl threatens to break it. She can't decide between them so the tensions mount. There are many moments of horror but essentially the films are a tangled teenage love story. It is widely dismissed as a bit of teenage fluff by many reviewers but the books and DVDs have made over a billion dollars so far in worldwide receipts. Maybe it's time to take this new emerging market more seriously.

Reinventing the Genres

Some writers have tried to “humanise” the creatures, as mentioned earlier, often to make them reverse the traditional roles and become more likable or at least more sympathetic. In the process much of the horror content has been lost. There are some notable and thoughtful exceptions.

With greater ecological awareness we can no longer slaughter werewolves with abandon. In *Wolfen* (1981) we saw their purpose as being a natural control of the human race.



More advanced than the traditional wolves, they were for a long time at the top of the food chain. Their numbers are reduced and humans are infesting the planet. Now we see the horror from both sides, predator and prey - but which is which?

A very recent reversal of the usual role is Remus Lupin in the Harry Potter series. He is cursed with lycanthropy and struggles bravely to control his affliction. Because of his condition he has had to marginalise himself in the school.

Another marginalised werewolf is in the Werewolf Girl series of Urban Fantasy books by Martin Millar. A werewolf girl is on the run from her own clan. Although the books have a serious plotline with many pure horror scenes you sometimes forget this in the parade of cross-dressing, fashionista, and troubled teenager werewolves she meets – all the problems of adapting to humanity from a werewolf's perspective. This later series and other good urban fantasy books have not yet been made into films – indeed, few modern werewolf stories have.



Those that have been made tend to follow the traditional evil model, like *30 Days of Night* (2007). Even the urban fantasy style, though, can be made into a good horror film given a willingness to write a good plot and direct it well.

Apart from the *Twilight* series and *Daybreaker* there seems to be no recent vampire films. Vampires may be important in *Twilight* or as a single character in the BBC comedy series *Being Human* (a vampire, werewolf and ghost sharing a flat in London) but horror films where the main protagonist is a vampire finished with *Daybreakers*.

The British have explored a revaluation of the creatures of horror to give them a scientific basis and so make them more credible in modern





times. An excellent BBC series, *Ultraviolet* (1998) revived the vampire storyline in Britain. The vampires keep a low profile but they wield a lot of control in the world and they have a malevolent plan for humanity. The series maintains a dark brooding menace that threatens to erupt into horror at any moment (and eventually does).

Humans

So far we have concentrated mainly on the creatures of horror. We mustn't forget that the greatest horrors are perpetrated by man. A psychotic killer is in many ways even more horrifying than a flesh-eating monster. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* was definitely horror when released in 1960 but now it is relegated to the suspense category. It is still one of the better films of its kind.

Films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) shocked us with their in-your-face violence and splatter. Splatter was the aim, though. There was little time given to look at the character of the psycho wielding the chainsaw when non-stop gore was what drew the crowds. As usual the success of these films spawned imitators and viewers were swamped in blood. The audiences became bored with a steady diet of splatter masquerading as horror. Gradually this style of film is moving away from the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to more thoughtful plots where the horror is hidden within an individual.

The Australian film *Wolf Creek* (2005) used a perfectly normal-looking outback "bushie" to



provide psychological terror then to inflict physical horror on his victims. The line between a good horror film and torture porn is stretched rather thinly in some films but *Wolf Creek* stays firmly in the horror genre.

Undoubtedly the best of the psycho villains was Hannibal Lecter. *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) introduced this scheming, completely amoral cannibal. A human monster capable of reading you like a book and even exercising a subtle





psychological control over you – I don't think there has ever been a more powerful depiction of an evil human, and the underlying horror was powerful.

Freddy Krueger was literally the stuff of nightmares. The character with the distorted face and the knife glove was part horror, part slasher, part occult. The *Nightmare on Elm Street* series killed him off but he kept coming back through peoples' dreams. This theme of the single completely irrational homicidal maniac occurs in a number of the great horror films, but many viewers think that Freddy did it best..

The classic Robert Louis Stevenson story *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was remade to postulate a genetic basis for Dr Jekyll's (now Dr Jackman) change into a monster in the BBC TV series *Jekyll*. The film has two main horror threads – Dr Jackman's awareness of his condition and that it will soon manifest itself in him, and an American group who deliberately push him into a Hyde spasm to find out what it is that turns him into a superhuman. Jackman has had to isolate himself from his family when he feels an attack coming on. The possibility

that he could kill or injure one of them is a part of the horror of his condition. That he must face it alone is another.

There are some fairly well used standard plots. Bunch of college kids on vacation in a cabin in the woods meet hillbilly murderer(s), bunch of college kids exploring the old lunatic asylum find it is still inhabited by psycho murderer(s), bunch of college kids overnighing on the deserted island, and so on. These plots are so well worn now that they have lost much of their horror and degenerated into formula fodder. They still, however, retain the scantily clad girls. You can predict what's going to happen next in these films and this familiarity was used very recently in the spoof *Tucker 'n Dale Vs. Evil* (2011) to reverse the roles. The bunch of airhead college kids know that the two red-necks, Tucker and Dale, are going to be homicidal hillbillies just like they have seen in the movies.

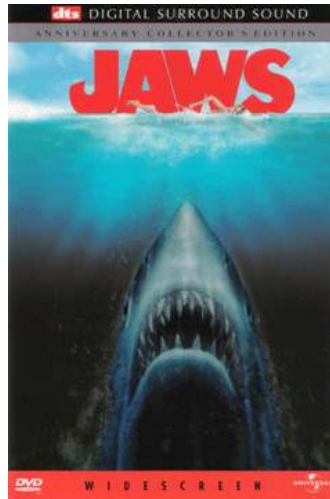
Others

Perhaps the most terrifying monster on film was the mother creature from *Alien*. (1979). Although this was supposed to be a SF film it also turned out to be really first class horror.



The moment when Sigourney Weaver turns around in the gloom and finds Mother standing behind her, all teeth and dripping saliva, was one of the most horrifying and startling in modern cinema. Its success naturally inspired many copies.

Another case is the film *Jaws* (1975) whose constant unremitting terror and suspense also led to many copies.



The Creature Feature has had a recent revival with Roger Corman and his many imitators making old-style monster films. Producers have lost much of the horror in the unlikely monsters (Crocosauruses???) and their passion for CGI. The films are not just derivative, some even borrow footage from other films. They are laughable and have completely lost the plot as far as horror goes.



To go back a long way, one of the better horror films featured a large, weatherbeaten truck as the source of the horror. *Duel* (1971) showed the brilliance of Steven Spielberg in his first directing role. The film has most of the elements of a good horror film. The antagonist is coldly irrational and pops up out of nowhere, the protagonist is helpless against the greater force of his opponent. We never see the truck driver.

The Tunnel (2010) is a more recent offering that contains all the classic elements – fear of the unknown, something nasty in the dark, a feeling of helplessness as the protagonists are picked off one by one. Set in old railway tunnels under Sydney, a group of young filmmakers set out to explore the tunnel complex. There is something living down there, and it's hungry.

A truly unusual budget film is *Paranormal Activity* (2007), in which we don't see the antagonist at all. The horror, then terror, builds as a result of little happenings that are inexplicable but undoubtedly hostile and becoming stronger. But who or what is responsible? This film plays on our fear of the dark and the unknown better than any other horror film I have seen.

Even toys can be objects of horror, as we saw in *Childs Play* (1988). Chucky, the evil doll, is

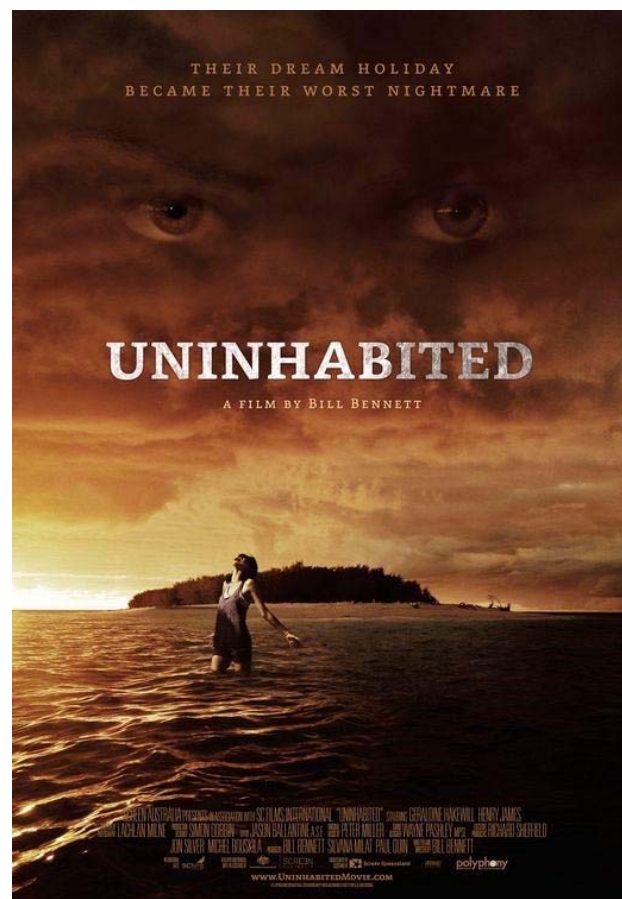




chilling in his sheer malevolence and in his unexpected character.

The Future

In the late 2000s the name of the game is Reimagining. This is a polite term for taking an old film and remaking it. It is something of an economic necessity given the recent sequence of events in the U.S. film industry. There was the writers' strike during which many of the better studio writers took their talents overseas. The Global Financial Crisis seriously reduced the money available for blockbusters. Many other countries now have high quality technical services and crews and will provide them at lower prices than the U.S. industry. Countries like New Zealand were early starters due to people like Peter Jackson, but even Romania has done its share of horror films thanks to its authentic scenery. Canada has been a huge beneficiary of the talent exodus. Countries like Australia have funded a number of independent productions (like *Wolf Creek*, *The Reef* and *Uninhabited*). There are currently ten films being made here. The state or national Film Boards' express aim is to keep the skills in their own country by keeping the producers and crews in work. This has worked quite well as each country seems to

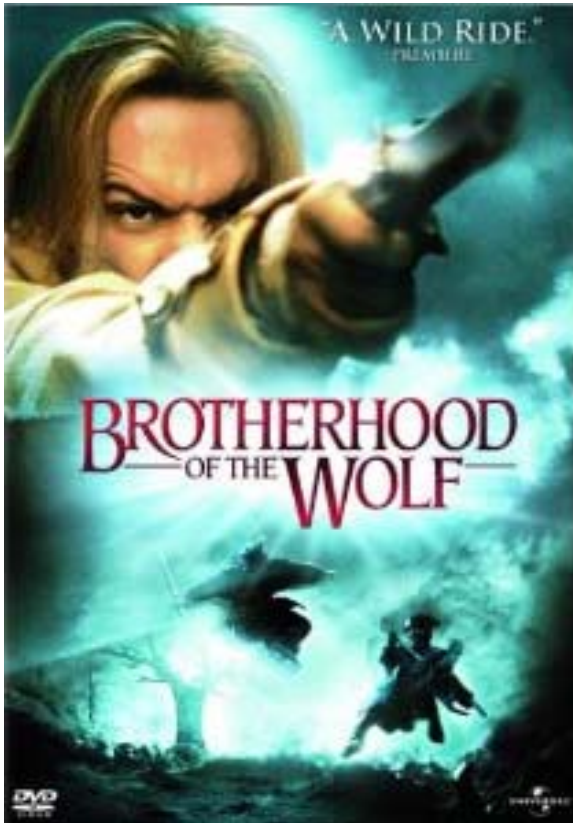


have its own ideas and we are losing the old copycat styles.

Why go to the expense and risk of producing a new major film when a hack writer can rewrite an old, proven plot and produce a "new" version with loads of inexpensive CGI? You can decide for yourself if the film really needed re-making, or even if any of the horror remains. There is still a tendency among producers to go for splatter as a substitute for horror..

Some companies are looking closely at the work of the independent producers, many of whom love horror. Some independent films are very good and with a studio offering help and guidance they can produce a high quality product at a lower price. The independent takes the risks, the studio takes the money. How many independent producers benefit from this remains to be seen but so far we have seen some quite good independent films being issued by major studios.

Other companies have found a likely foreign plot and remade it to be more compatible with English-speaking audiences. Japanese and Korean films often suffer this fate.



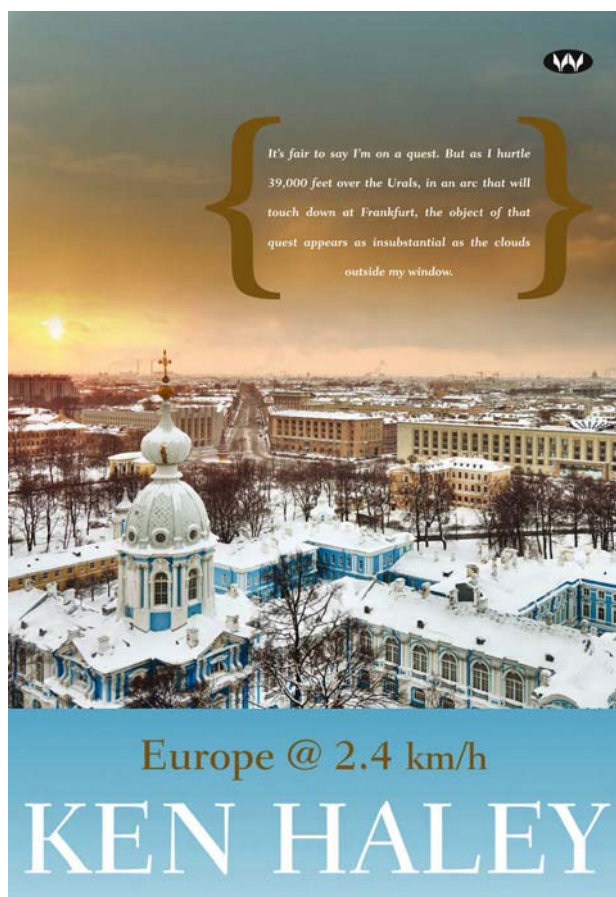
With a decreasing amount of product coming onto the market distributors are looking at foreign films for distribution, not just rewriting. Countries with established industries like China, Korea and Japan are doing well out of wider distribution and have a rich horror tradition to draw on for their plots. European countries' outputs are being scanned for marketable films and



many have developed their own thoughtful styles of horror. My introduction to foreign horror was a grim little film called *13 Tzameti* (France, 2005). It deals with a game of Russian roulette played for money, and one victim's innocent attempt to make some money from it. It has just been remade in the U.S. and rather surprisingly the producer hasn't filled it with splatter. Examples of overseas horror include *The Others* (Spain, France, U.S. and Italy, 2001), *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (France, 2001), and *Let The Right One In* (Sweden, 2008).

There are still good films coming from the U.S. even if they are few and far between. The *SAW* series is the highest grossing horror franchise ever, although some may classify it more as Torture Porn rather than horror.

The classic horror elements are there though – an irrational killer, a feeling of helplessness among the individuals, and a gloomy setting. Unfortunately many filmmakers are once again moving towards increasing the violence and splatter in their horror films. Torture Porn is something you either love or hate but many feel it demeans the horror in the film.



Europe at 2.4 km/h
Ken Haley
Wakefield Press (2011)

It is hard to classify this book. It is part history, part geography, and a lot about the people of Europe and their attitudes to Europeanisation. It also covers a lot of the jealousies and differences of the European countries and sometimes Ken is able to trace how those jealousies developed.

He has plenty of time to study the people since he is wheelchair-bound. One of the biggest differences between countries is how they treat disabled people. Many times he was helped by friendly people in the face of official indifference, if not downright rudeness. Many of those who helped him were not “European” but part of the flood of refugees and immigrants from trouble spots around the world. The difficulty of propelling a wheelchair through Europe is a constant theme.

For instance the Swedish railways require 36 hours notice for wheelchair travellers so they can get a ramp delivered.



Even when Ken was helped onto a Russian train by friendly locals his wheelchair would not fit down the aisle so he had to spend the night sitting in his wheelchair in the draughty vestibule. A conductor a little less officious than most at least found him a blanket.

Why would a supposedly rational man, in a wheelchair, choose to cross Europe the hard way – from north to south? We never quite find out but I suspect from Ken’s writings that there is a bit of pride involved and a deep interest in what makes people tick in different countries.

Some countries live up to their stereotypes – the Germans are efficient, the French ARE generally rude and the Spanish are so inward looking to the olden days of Spanish glory that the EEC seems to have passed them by. Ken makes a practice of asking what people think of their neighbours in the adjacent country. The answers are enlightening if not always complimentary.

The snippets of history he gives go a long way to explaining the differences. Royalty, religion (and religious persecution) and industry all played their part in the way the countries devel-



oped. *"How could you have a conversation in Norway without mentioning fish?"*

As Ken trundles through Europe we get glimpses of his wry and often penetrating sense of humour. The European approach to English is, shall we say, original. On the last night on board a tourist ship "a crew member said to one of the diners "I hope you will enjoy your last meal"". He spent a night with a friendly couple who turned out to be retired professional thieves, and made a special detour to a town called Hell so his passport can now show that he has been to Hell and back. Such little memories lift the book well above travelogue status.

Some things you probably needed to know:

Sweden has its own Loch Ness monster, Storsjudejuret.

Any desire to help its passengers is bred out of its staff early (Swedish Railways)

The Dutch have a museum dedicated to marijuana.



Their railways – porters who won't carry, a Help Desk that gives you a phone number to ring – for help.

Even the Germans use "typical German" as a swearword

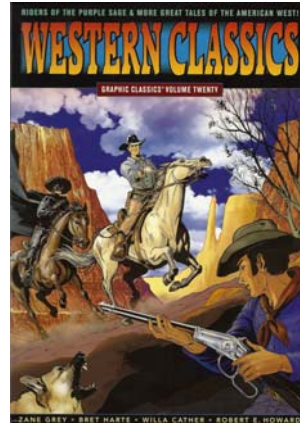
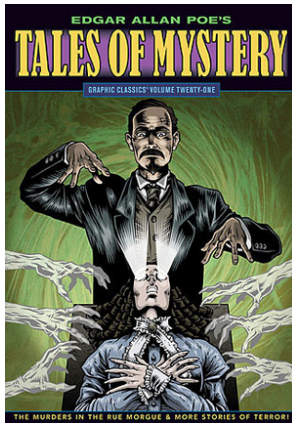
The French railways don't wish a passenger "Bon Voyage" on their tickets – they wish their passengers "Good Luck" instead.

Be careful of the monkey droppings as you climb the stairs on the Rock of Gibraltar on your hands and bum because there is no wheelchair access.

Staying within his limited budget was always a problem for Ken but often kind people would put him up free for the night in their own homes. Moving around in his wheelchair was likewise a problem, and once again kind people helped him out of trouble.

So at the end of it all, 25,000 km later, how have the Europeans adapted to their new multinational character?

Ken's experiences suggest that they haven't and probably won't. There are still the same old jealousies and suspicions. To most people they are still French or Spanish or Danes. Most couldn't care about the EEC one way or another. They leave that to the politicians. The people themselves however, not their railways, usually define a wonderful group of individuals.



Graphic Classics Western Classics and Tales of Mystery Eureka Publications (2011)

Here's a question for you – does rewriting a classic book in comic book format cheapen the story, or simply make it more available to a wider range of readers? The “Graphic Classics” series is a good way to find out. The style may not suit everybody but they are far more readable.

A good example here is Volume 21, *Tales of Mystery*, an updated set of Edgar Allen Poe stories. I have never been fond of Poe's work. I found his writing ponderous and stilted, even pompous, but I cannot deny the man's ability to write a powerful supernatural or horror story. By reducing the story to its bare minimum and using graphics to fill in much of the detail I think this volume is now much more suited to new readers of his work. There is enough text to give an idea of his style without detracting from his story. His original text is used rather than some trendy modernised version and this also builds up the atmosphere of each story.

Not all the books are from the early days. Volume 20, *Western Classics*, is a compilation of the old pulp Westerns, including notable authors like Zane Grey. From him we get the classic *Riders of the Purple Sage*. These were cheap, popular entertainment just after World War II. My father was a keen reader of the westerns and to some extent I learned to read on these cheap books. I still like a good western, but I have become a bit more discerning in my old age.

The characters in these books are stamped out from a cliché mould. There is the tall handsome Hero, a crack shot with a gun and a revenger of



wrongs. He will probably have A Secret. He will get The Girl, a tough but honest and attractive young lady whose Pa was killed by the baddies. The baddies, of course, will be led by the Evil Saloon Owner / property owner who will want the water or the girl or both. There is usually an Amusing Sidekick hanging around somewhere. Great literature? No. Great entertainment? Yes.

The books are not dumbed down for the reading-challenged. As modern English tends towards phonetics rather than correctly spelled, grammatically correct language, showing young readers how it should be written will be a problem. Series like Graphic Classics can only help.

The quality of the artwork varies from beautifully drawn scenery to crudely daubed work that would be more at home on a pop art poster. The illustrators come from a range of backgrounds and their origins show in their work. We even get a brief bio on each artist.

Will the format encourage more readers to explore the classic books? Time will tell.

Pros and Ex Cons
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

Tim Boyle's film is a rather confusing and derivative mix of plot threads in the line of Snatch or Pulp Fiction. It has its rough spots but is peppered with strokes of comedy that take the seriousness from the film.



A lazy gunman who hires another assassin to do his jobs because he can't shoot straight?

A pair of no hopers who reinvent the prehistoric Superman 3 scam of taking a fraction of a percent from each bank transaction?

A pair of heavies who manage to shoot the wrong victim?

It starts with the Rich Guy who finds his wife is having a affair. He arranges his killers to have her taken care of. Naturally they get it wrong. One of the no hopers has lost over a hundred thousand of the money he doesn't actually have yet from the scam. He is about to lose a significant body part if he can't make the repayment. The two (well, one) assassins always seem to



be the last on the scene, finding only bodies. The body count mounts until we get the compulsory gunfight in a bank.

The film is not a great piece of cinema, but it's very entertaining and action filled. Even in the quiet moments you can play spot the Australian star. The clichés come thick and fast.

Tim Boyle complained that the film was taken from him in the post production / editing phase. It was slapped together in a hurry and this may account for some of the rough bits and the decidedly poor quality sound track. They have turned what could have been at least a decent film into a rather sloppy job that loses a lot of its impact and doesn't seem to know what sort of a film it wants to be when it grows up. I guess we should hope for a Director's Cut one day, but until then it's still good, bloody fun.



The Puppet Monster Massacre MVD R1 DVD

Peter Jackson's Meet The Feebles meets Christopher Mihm's It Came From Beneath The Earth in this demented parody of bad science fiction films. All the essential ingredients are there – mad Nazi scientist, innocent shy young lad and his would-be girlfriend, the pervert horror film buff, a penguin and lots of bunnies.

The use of sock puppets is not unique but in this film it is done with the obvious fakery that appeals. There is also a fair amount of paper cut-out work in the style of South Park. It is all a hilarious blend of fakey-looking puppets, bad effects and dodgy script.

Four local teenagers are invited to spend a night in a haunted house owned by an evil scientist, Dr Wolfgang Wagner. If any survive a million dollars in prize money will be divided between them. One young lad brings his girlfriend with him and they proceed to have sex in the cemetery at the back of the house. The scientist has an ulterior motive. In the dying days of Nazi Germany his research facility was attacked by a



special group of American commandos. They burnt the labs and destroyed the vicious monsters being developed there. The scientist escaped with the last example of his monster. Now it has hatched, it is hungry and the slaughter begins.

Fortunately the kids have an unexpected ally. Until the final showdown we get lots of fart jokes, huge quantities of blood and gore, and sexual references (no surprise there). There are jokes and scenes pinched from early "serious" films.

The film looks like it was made using someone's lunch money. This would normally be a big drawback but I feel the film was deliberately made this way – aim low to start with. The resulting film doesn't hide its flaws. It positively glories in them, quite unashamed. It's great entertainment.



7 Days
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

French with English subtitles

An intelligent and savage revenge / horror story, *7 Days* reflects on vengeance on a criminal who has murdered a man's daughter. Bruno is a surgeon, trained to have respect for life and to save it where possible. His wife Sylvie works in a gallery. Their eight-year-old daughter Jasmine is kidnapped, raped and murdered by a paedophile named Lemaire. The once-happy family is torn to pieces by the tragedy. The police work quickly and arrest a known child molester but Bruno is filled with dark thoughts and Sylvie has retreated inside her mind.

Bruno engineers a breakout from a prison van and takes Lemaire to a lonely cabin in the forest. There he begins to methodically and extensively torture Lemaire. His Hippocratic oath is forgotten in his need for revenge. Bruno has some support from members of the public interviewed on TV. He is surprised therefore when he finally contacts Sylvie to find she is against what he is doing. On the other hand members of the public are urging him to continue. Some of his supporters are themselves parents of children who have been murdered by the same man.

He has a somewhat sympathetic relationship with the police officer who is tracking him down.



When asked if he can save Lemaire in time the policeman says it is not Lemaire he wants to save. His wife was murdered and he knows the grief that Bruno must be experiencing. Bruno promises he will kill Lemaire and turn himself in in seven days, a date that would have been Jasmine's birthday. As the police close in it is a race to see if they can get Lemaire before he is killed or whether Bruno will allow his basic humanity to come through and cease torturing both Lemaire and himself. Towards the end he seems to be running on automatic. He is torturing Lemaire because that's what he decided to do, but his heart is no longer in it.

Bruno seems to be a hopeless case, now, with revenge his only motive for carrying on. There is the faintest glimmer of hope for him, but will he take it?

The film could almost verge on torture porn but its treatment, while vicious, is understandable. Whether you agree with what Bruno is doing is up to you.

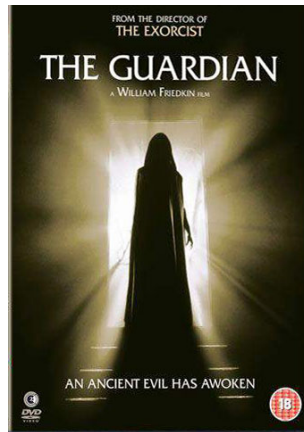


The Guardian Supernatural Horror Second Sight Films R2 DVD

In a rather interesting interview in the Extras William Friedkin, the Director, makes the point that his previous highly successful film *The Exorcist* wasn't intended to be a horror film. It became classified as horror simply because that's the effect it had on audiences. *The Guardian* seems destined to repeat this. It is classic horror in that it relies for impact on lighting, the helplessness of the protagonists in the face of the supernatural; and a steady buildup of tension. The viewer supplements the story by filling in the details from their own feelings and beliefs.

A young couple have a new baby and hire a nanny, Camilla, to look after him while they work. The attractive Camilla seems to be exactly what they need, dedicated to the baby, but she has another agenda. She is a Druid and has a symbiotic relationship with an ancient tree in the nearby forest. In return for personal immortality she supplies the tree with human sacrifices – babies. The need for babies is covered by a throwaway line - "...before their blood changes". The viewer is left to imagine what that might mean.

It is not too long before the young couple note strange behaviour in the otherwise normal Camilla. She spends a lot of time in the woods with the baby. She won't allow a doctor to examine him. If she or the baby are threatened a tribe of



coyotes will appear and defend them. The tree is capable of defending Camilla and itself too but the worried parents don't know this – yet..

Finally the husband checks Camilla's references and is deeply disturbed to find they are all false. One of his friends says his own baby disappeared with their nanny and they now know Camilla has plans for their own child.

Cinematography, effects and acting are all first class. It is a pleasant change to be able to watch a night scene and still see what is going on. Friedkin has used all these to construct an eerie, atmospheric film. The nude and partly nude scenes by Camilla (Jenny Seagrove) are tasteful. She earned the part through acting skill, not nudity. There is a reasonable amount of splatter but it is not used as a substitute for drama. There are enough questions left incomplete for the viewers to use their own imaginations.

Although the film was first released in 1990 it has aged well. Good horror never goes out of fashion, and *The Guardian* is good horror.



Martyrs
Kojo Films
Gryphon Distribution Australia
R4 DVD

Martyrs is truly a unique experience. It is harrowing, confronting and visceral. It is often difficult to watch and hard to bear yet it keeps you glued to the scene though you are shocked, if not horrified by what you see. Many people will find this film too much to handle, its themes are powerful and confronting, its violence graphic and the underlying psychological motifs deliberately provocative.

In my mind this all adds up to a truly awe inspiring work of cinema; it may not be easy to watch and it is not enjoyable in the traditional sense of the word, but it challenges in the way that true "at the edge" cinema should do.

When the film was presented at film festivals during 2007, many viewers walked out and it is rumored some even threw up in the aisles. Whether this is true or simple hype, I wouldn't necessarily be surprised by such reactions as this is an extreme film. At the same time reviewers who denounced this film as torture porn are doing the director, Pascal Laugier a grave disservice. The term torture porn should be understood in relation of the second word in the term, porn. Porn is the display of biological functions without context.

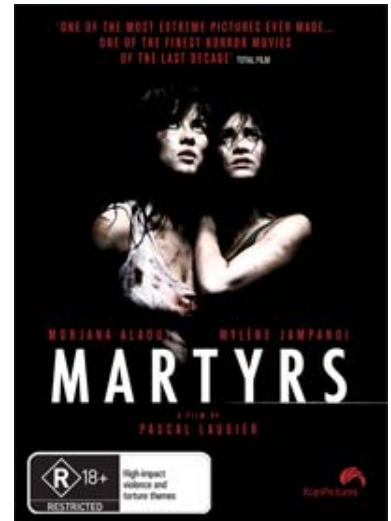
This is the difference, in my books anyway, between erotica and pornography. Torture porn is a modern trend, primarily in US horror films, which uses extreme violence including torture

and mutilation purely for effect without much context or plot. Martyrs is exactly the opposite to this. It is one of the first films I have seen where I believe every piece of extreme and sometimes brutal violence (and there is a whole lot of it) is justified by the plot.

This is a film saturated with meaning. Just some of the themes explored include the effects of abuse and torture, self mutilation, psychosis and mental illness, religious and political extremism and even love and affection between those damaged by their life experience.

Laugier deliberately leaves the true meaning of Martyrs undefined and you can read the film in many different ways. On one level it is an exploration of how far religious extremists will go to achieve evidence of life after death, on another the stupidity of valuing suffering and pain over accepting life as it is. The crux seems to be the speech given in the middle of the film where martyrdom is extolled as a virtue and all manner of torture and suffering used to justify achieving "transfiguration". While the organization which coordinates these "experiments" is not named, its use of the term "transfiguration" (a Christian term used within mysticism) and its emphasis on young girls being the best subjects seems to hint at Roman Catholicism.

At the same time the breeding of martyrs could equally be applied to certain sects of Islam. In any event it is a fairly sustained attack on the fanaticism that results from





emphasizing a supposed life after death over this one. Within the context of this larger picture, which really only becomes clear half way through the film, there is an exploration of the horrific effects of abuse. For the first 50 minutes of *Martyrs* we experience the truly harrowing suffering which Lucie is going through trying to find those who abused her and bring them to justice.

During this period Laugier sustains the mystery as to whether the cuts, bruises and violence visited on Lucie's body are the result of intra psychic psychosis (within her mind) or caused by a dead girl which is haunting her. The effect of her psychosis is heightened when we juxtaposition it to the plight of Anna who truly loves Lucie and tries to help her but realizes their lives are dangerously out of control.

Lucie brutally slaughters a family as she believes the husband and wife were her captors, Anna is not so sure. Lucie's inner torment becomes so extreme that she inflicts all manner of abuse on herself, scenes which are uncomfortable and painful to watch.

This is when the film begins to switch gears and it is a testimony to Laugier that he is able to move between what at first seems to be a revenge film to something altogether more frightening. Lucie loses control when she realizes Anna does not believe her and believing that the dead girl is trying to kill her actually kills her, a

sad and harrowing end to her life.

Anna finds a hidden laboratory under the house and must confront the pain that her lack of belief has led Lucie to kill herself.

The scene where she begs Lucie's dead body forgiveness is tragic and moving. she confronts not only a further victim but the mysterious organization behind it all.

We start to get an inkling of what they want as they extol the value of martyrdom and suffering. Soon Anna will know firsthand as she becomes the focus of their experiments.

The scenes of torture and abuse now become quite overwhelming. While they are certainly justified in the context of the story they are hard to watch. It would be fair to say that if these scenes did not have any meaning then we could criticize the director for using gratuitous violence, however, they do lead somewhere. The ending is astounding and leaves us pause to think. The way in which a range of themes are interwoven together to create a challenging and thought provoking film is impressive. The acting is superb, the score is haunting and the cinematography excellent. There are little things which have such an effect such as the fact that the "normal" family living an average life upstairs with their kids, one of which is a local swimming champ, at the same can rub a torture den downstairs all in the name of some form of extreme ideology.

I consider *Martyrs* a masterful work of cinema; it explores a range of intriguing and provocative ideas in a way that literally kicks you in the guts. It is one thing to contemplate issues relating to abuse and the effect of ideology theoretically, it is another to have it seen through the eyes of its helpless victims. This is courageous filmmaking and if you are willing to take the journey you will be rewarded, but it will not be an easy ride.

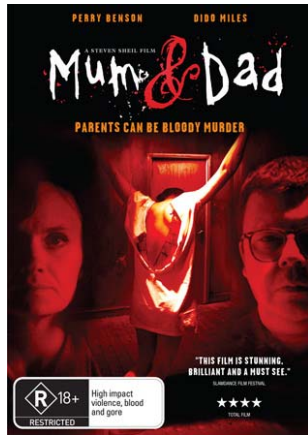
Mum and Dad
Anchor Bay
R4 DVD

Mum and Dad is a stunning, terrifying and confronting horror tale taking its inspiration from such killers as Ed Gein and the Gloucester serial killers, Fred and Rose West. It offers a cutting edge perspective of horror cinema, while it does include extreme violence, torture and sadism, there is a powerful psychological angle which makes it very different from the current trend in torture horror films.

Lena is a young airport cleaner who has recently emigrated from Poland. She has befriending by Birdie, a young girl at work, who seems to take a lot of interest finding out about her family and friends. Birdie is bubbly and friendly, but something just doesn't seem quite right. Birdie manipulates events so Lena misses her bus home and then invites her to come and have a meal and meet her parents.

When Lena arrives Birdie and her brother Elbie vanish off into the house and soon she is drugged and chained to a bed. She awakens to the reality of her new life. Mum and Dad are violent psychopaths living as an average working class couple and she is their new daughter. Dad likes to sexually abuse and torture his victims before dismembering them and using their goods as a source of income. Mum likes to cut and torture her children and only protects them from Dad if they fulfil her every whim and fancy. Birdie and Elbie are the "adopted" children of the couple, but many others have not made the grade including one reduced to being a near vegetable, but kept alive in the attic as an occasional plaything for Dad. Dad must be regularly placated and if you try to escape you will pay a very dear price.

The film, as would be expected, is packed with torture, gore and violence but this is not really the most disturbing element, it is the portrayal of dysfunction and madness which really puts you on edge. The violence, however, is extreme, from torture, cutting and sexual abuse, to dismemberment and a Christmas tree that has to be seen to be believed.



As the tale progresses we come to experience the infighting of a truly insane family as they go about their daily chores, albeit of a serial killer type. Some keep and wash the victim's clothes, Elbie packs the body parts in bubble wrap and buries them and so on. It becomes more and more bizarre and unnerving as the film progresses, until, at last, Lena has a chance to escape.

The psychology of *Mum and Dad* is what makes the film so disturbing. We have a simple working class couple who are also serial killers. The normal "dysfunction" is writ large, everything becomes disturbed and distorted. Mum needs to be placated and to feel wanted and Dad administers the discipline, but here it is ever so extreme. There is squabbling between the kids, but this time they are vying for their survival in a hierarchy which is based on sex and violence. They taunt and betray each other for affection, but the affection is laced with sex and violence yet loss of it may result in an early demise. Mum and Dad truly believe in the value of the family, but oh what a family it is. This is family values at its most sickening.

The play between madness and intense violence keeps you constantly on the edge of your seat. It is too easy for extreme violence to distance or detach the viewer in a jaded haze of gore, but here the intense horror is balanced with a strong plot, excellent character development and a perverse view of the family which makes it work all too well!

The acting is utterly superb, Mum and Dad (Dido Miles and Perry Benson) are so totally believable that you never doubt for a moment the authenticity of what you are watching.

This is a dark, gruelling and gut wrenching film which will shock and amaze, it is well worth the experience, if you dare.

Gangs of Taipei
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

*Mandarin etc ,
English subtitles*

This is director Doze Niu's second film and it shows a couple of minor defects in his technique that will no doubt iron themselves out in time.

The first problem is that he tries to cover a lot of themes in the film – coming of age, loyalty to your Boss and fellow gang members, first love, and the conflict between the gang and a real life. The main thread is the story of a turf war developing between the Taipei gangs and the "mainlanders". The second problem is that the boys are a little too "pretty boy" to be gangsters. Still, if that's what the audiences want

It is set in the 1980s when Taiwan finally felt comfortable enough with its mainland neighbour to dismantle its military government. The overstretched police cannot do their jobs adequately so the Bosses and their gangs have sprung up. Each has a few blocks to control and although they exploit the local businessmen through extortion and feel they are above the law, they provide a rough and ready form of justice in their areas.

Mosquito is still at school, a solitary student, picked on by a group of bullies who will undoubtedly join a gang one day. In a fight on the

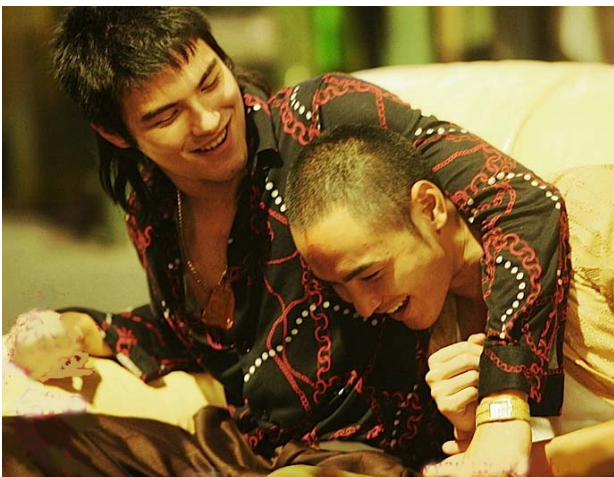


way home Nosquito puts up a good fight against them and is seen by another group led by Dragon Lee. Mosquito is invited to join Lee's group, the Temple Front gang. In the gang, Mosquito finds his place. He now has friends and respect. He is a fearless fighter and protector of the gang's turf and is destined for bigger things.

The pressure on the gangs in the Mongo suburb of Taipei mounts as the mainlanders move in, aided by some of the local gangs and Bosses. Mosquito's boss refuses to recognise the danger – for instance he still feels that the weapon of the true warrior is the sword. Guns are for little people and criminals.

The mainlanders have no such qualms. Now the war erupts, not as street brawls but as assassinations. When he kills a man Mosquito realises he will have to leave Taipei for the Philippines and lie low for a couple of years, leaving all that he has built up behind him. So much for the glorious life of a gangster.

The major problem of the film is a technical one. The subtitles are in white and superimposed on the picture. They are often impossible to read especially against the colourful and busy scenes in the alleys and streets of the gang's district. This is the only real letdown in what is otherwise a very good gangster film.



Gangs of Taipei
Pinnacle Films
R4 DVD

*Mandarin etc ,
English subtitles*

This is director Doze Niu's second film and it shows a couple of minor defects in his technique that will no doubt iron themselves out in time.

The first problem is that he tries to cover a lot of themes in the film – coming of age, loyalty to your Boss and fellow gang members, first love, and the conflict between the gang and a real life. The main thread is the story of a turf war developing between the Taipei gangs and the "mainlanders". The second problem is that the boys are a little too "pretty boy" to be gangsters. Still, if that's what the audiences want

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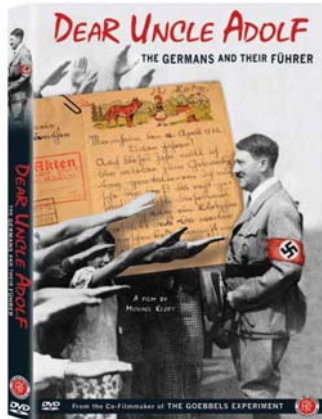
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Dear Uncle Hitler
First Run Features
R1 DVD

I am not sure of the correct title of this film. Although the DVD slick shows it as *Dear Uncle Adolf*, the title in the film itself is *Dear Uncle Hitler*.



In a huge archive in Moscow hundreds of boxes contain letters to Adolf Hitler from Germans during the period 1930 to 1945. The letters range from the most sycophantic to requests for Hitler to release their family members. Through the words in these letters we can see the adulation of Hitler right through to the end of the War when the gloss had worn off the Nazis' "Thousand Year Reich". These letters go a long way to explain how it was that he got away with his rise to power and his subsequent dreadful acts. Although many Germans disagreed with his policies he was able to defuse opposition by providing benefits to the people. The German reoccupation of the Rhineland raised German morale and national pride, although others knew it could lead to war. Nevertheless Hitler rode to power on a wave of jingoistic fervour.

From the huge carefully stage-managed parades and rallies we can see the importance of mob psychology as a way of uniting Germans. The progressive looting of the Jews offered more money to the government, confiscated properties to local councils, and increased business opportunities for local businessmen who could buy the ex-Jewish businesses at a bar-



gain price. The new policies were not accepted by everyone but protest became harder. One poignant letter from a lady asks Hitler to intervene in the imprisonment of her husband without trial for the last five months. Hitler apparently ignored her repeated requests for information.

The letters show a successful rabid response to the anti-Semitic propaganda among supposedly normal people. Even the young people finally had their own organisations and had a strong feel of belonging. Some of the letters show just how effective the anti-Jewish propaganda was. One eight year old boy urges Hitler to hurry up and liberate his area (the Sudetenland) as a





Jewish festival is coming up soon and they know that the Jews kill German children and eat them on this holiday. Another teenage girl wants to have Hitler's baby so his line will not die out. It is the effectiveness of the propaganda on the young that is the saddest part of the film.

The pro-Hitler feeling was not always universal. Nazi demographic studies showed regional reactions to some programs varied. In the urbanised and mostly Catholic west there was disapproval of the destruction of Jewish businesses and synagogues. There was, by this time, no remaining German organisation big enough to take on the Nazis.

The Churches could have tried but didn't so we see letters invoking God's protection of Hitler. The Germans were not alone in this. (Remember "God Save The King" ???) but the churches were noticeably reluctant to comment on the destruction of Jewish culture. The Ecclesiastical Council of the German Protestant Church actually wrote to Hitler and promised loyalty to him.

Even military men were reluctant to take action against him, relying on Hitler's obvious insanity to eventually make him commit a fatal error. Others justified their non-action by saying that a loss of the war would render Germany liable to tremendous punishment, even worse than after World War I, so they had better win the war. Hitler seemed the leader most likely to achieve this.

After the massive German loss at Stalingrad the number of letters dropped off dramatically. As

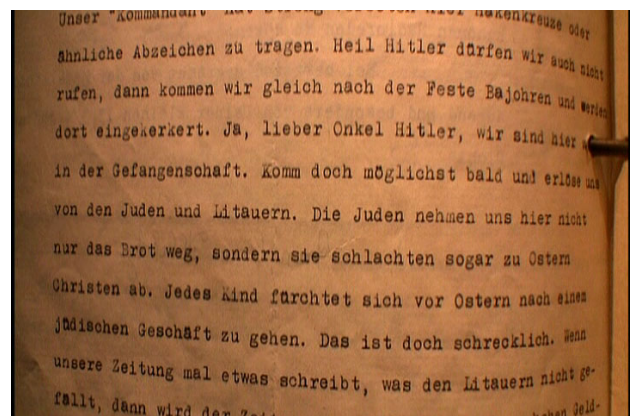
the war turned and Germany experienced for the first time the horrors of mass bombing the number of letters slows down and they take a grimmer tone. Mothers ask for their sons to be spared from any further war or pray to Hitler for their safe return. The news that the formerly invincible Hitler had committed suicide in his bunker still came to a shock to many, although the end of the war was obviously coming rapidly.

There can be few if any similar archives that allow a researcher to look at the personality cult of a strong leader or to study the effectiveness of propaganda. Germans gave up a lot of their liberties under the Nazis but there were enough carrots in with the sticks to make Hitler's propaganda more effective.

If there are any conclusions to be drawn from the film they are:

*People want to be led.
They will believe what they are told if it is repeated strongly enough.
To make the propaganda effective any critical voices should be silenced.
Get them while they are young.*

They are hard lessons, and it is difficult to imagine the reaction on an individual German of finding that his leader was really a mass murdering liar – and they had fallen for it. This film shows why. It makes no judgment on the German people but reflects their almost God-like belief in their leader. It shows that belief fading as history moves on.



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